小説 仮面ライダー鎧武

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NOVEL: KAMEN RIDER GAIM

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Character

Introduction

Takatora Kureshima (Armored Rider Zangetsu Shin)

A man who continues to fight as Kamen Rider Zangetsu Shin. As the person who was once in charge of Yggdrasill's "Project Ark", which planned to save only a limited fraction of the human population, he had been fighting with determination to bear his own sins alone, but after meeting Kouta Kazuraba and clashing against his younger brother, Mitsuzane Kureshima, he realized the true meaning of saving the world. Currently, he is assisting with the reconstruction of Zawame, while also traveling the world in order to recollect the sprouts left behind by Yggdrasill's misuse of technology.

Oren Pierre Alfonzo (Armored Rider Bravo)

The manager of the famous pastry shop "Charmant" in Zawame. He had once joined the army in order to obtain French nationality, and his fighting ability is far beyond that of an average person. In trying to be a hero who protected Zawame, he had a hostile relationship with the Beat Riders, but once he learned the truth about the Helheim forest, he came to assist them in protecting the city. He was able to recognize Hideyasu Jounouchi's potential in becoming a talented pastry chef, and started training him day and night as his disciple. His original name was Gennosuke Ouren. He refers to Takatora as "Sir Melon", and harbors respect and adoration for him.

Kugai Kudou (Armored Rider Saver)

A Yggdrasill researcher who was killed in a past disastrous accident with the Apple Lockseed. He then appeared in front of Ryouma Sengoku, bearing a

mysterious Lockseed. He seems to be able to transform into an Armored Rider, but there are still many mysteries about him.

Kouta Kazuraba (Armored Rider Gaim; Man of the Beginning)

A kind-hearted young man who continued to fight to protect others instead of for his own desires, despite harboring worries of his own and being at the mercy of his own great power. After fighting against Yggdrasill, awakening his own power as an Overlord, and winning a decisive battle with Kaito Kumon over the fate of the world, he became a transcendent being known as the “Man of the Beginning”. Alongside Mai Takatsukasa, who had become the “Woman of the Beginning”, he departed Earth, taking the threat of Helheim with him.

Kaito Kumon (Armored Rider Baron)

A young man who, at a young age, came to know the suffering of the weak being trampled by the strong, and attempted to create a world where the weak would not be oppressed. His high degree of charisma drew people towards him, both enemies and allies. After a decisive battle against his fated rival, Kouta Kazuraba, he acknowledged Kouta’s strength, and his short life came to an end.

Mai Takatsukasa (Woman of the Beginning)

A member of Team Gaim, and a childhood friend of Kouta Kazuraba. She once spent her time aiming to become a professional dancer, and practiced her dancing every day and night. After Roshuo implanted the Golden Fruit into her heart, she was reincarnated into the “Woman of the Beginning”. She

then traveled through time and began continually warning the humans of the past about the future, in the hopes of preventing conflict.

Ryouma Sengoku (Armored Rider Duke)

A genius researcher from Yggdrasill, who developed the Sengoku Driver. With a ruthless and self-righteous personality, he was willing to do anything it took to obtain what he wanted. After obtaining the Golden Fruit through Mai Takatsukasa's heart, he was fatally wounded by Kaito Kumon in the form of Lord Baron, and ultimately perished after falling from a building.

Mitsuzane Kureshima (Armored Rider Ryugen)

A member of Team Gaim, and the younger brother of Takatora Kureshima. Being used to constantly lying in order to hide his whereabouts, he ended up finding himself on the path of bearing his burdens alone. However, his heart was saved by Kouta Kazuraba and Mai Takatsukasa's forgiveness, and he vowed to protect the world that they wanted to protect. Currently, he is attending a university in Zawame, and plans to eventually assist his older brother, Takatora Kureshima, with whom he has reconciled.

Zack (Armored Rider Knuckle)

A member of Team Baron, and its current leader. After Kaito Kumon's departure, he continued to fight against the Invase and Overlords and protect the city as Kamen Rider Knuckle. He has a passionate personality and, in order to carry on Kaito Kumon's wishes, was the one to put an end to the Neo Baron incident. He is waiting for an opportunity to return to the United States to put his dancing skills to the test.

Hideyasu Jounouchi (Armored Rider Gridon)

The leader of Team Invitto, and a pastry chef apprentice who works at the pastry shop “Charmant”. A self-proclaimed tactician, he tried to use underhanded tactics hoping to not get his own hands dirty, but went through personal growth via his training under Oren Pierre Alfonzo and came to face the city’s crisis head-on. He is now improving his own skills as a pastry chef, including managing the store in the actual manager’s absence.

Shapur

A prince of a certain country, whose face looks identical to Kaito Kumon’s. His personality is the exact opposite of Kaito’s, and he is bright and never stops smiling. When he visited Zawame, he was impressed at seeing Kaito save him from assassination, and, inspired by his bonds with those around him, he reflected on his own responsibilities. Once the conflict had ended, he returned to his country, and left a letter for Kaito saying “There are people who will be on my side when I return. I’ll try believing in them.”

Sagara

A mysterious man referred to as “the serpent” by the Overlords, and who refers to himself as the embodiment of Helheim itself. He appeared in front of the humans who were involved in the world’s destruction and recreation, including Kouta Kazuraba.

Mikhail Stuglev

The president of a Russian high-tech venture corporation that assists Takatora Kureshima.

Peko

A member of Team Baron, and its current second-in-command. He loves dancing, and when he fought against Kaito Kumon regarding a joint dance event, his passion for dancing became clear. He is currently working alongside Team Gaim to dance on stage and bring liveliness to the city.

Rica, **Chucky**, **Rat**

Members of Team Gaim. They once competed against other teams in the past, but they currently dance together in order to bring excitement to Zawame.

Youko Minato (Armored Rider Malika)

A member of Yggdrasill Corporation, and Ryouma Sengoku's secretary. After meeting Kaito Kumon, she was inspired by his obsession with power, and chose to see it through to the end. She gave up her life to protect Kaito Kumon from a bomb that Zack had planted.

Sid (Armored Rider Sigurd)

A lock dealer who secretly operated behind the scenes in Zawame. He betrayed Yggdrasill for the sake of his own ambitions and challenged Roshuo for the Golden Fruit, but lost to his overwhelming power and lost his life.

Ryouji Hase (Armored Rider Kurokage)

The leader of Team Raid Wild. Alongside Hideyasu Jounouchi, he attempted to outsmart the other teams, but continually slipped up thanks to his reckless personality and poor judgment. After eating a Helheim fruit, he was transformed into an Invase, and was ultimately disposed of by Sid.

Kougane (Armored Rider Malus, Armored Rider Jam)

An artificial Golden Fruit created by Overlords in the past. He eventually was completely eliminated by Mitsuzane Kureshima and the “Man of the Beginning” Kouta Kazuraba.

Kiyojirou Bandou

Owner of the fruit parlor “Drupers”.

Iyo

A part-time employee of the fruit parlor “Drupers”.

Raymond, **Scythe**, **Isaac**

Mercenaries who once fought through the world’s battlefields alongside Oren Pierre Alfonzo. They know Oren well and trust him deeply.

Prelude

Two men locked in combat.
Two people in armor, like warriors.
“Kaito! Haven’t you gotten anything out of this besides sadness and despair!? Is anger all you’re made of!?”
“That’s right! I’ve come to despise this world that only adds suffering to weakness, where the only way to survive is to become stronger! I’ll obtain the power to destroy all of it — once I overcome you!!”
“I won’t let you, I can’t let you! If that’s what you want to do, I have to be here to stop you!”
The first person, the one who despised the world where the strong trampled on the weak, despised his own weakness and strove to become stronger than anyone else.
Kaito Kumon — the embodiment of anger full of contradictions, Lord Baron, the flame of the crimson lotus of misfortune.
The other, who continued to have doubts despite being at the mercy of the world’s senseless malice, and thus devoted himself and his body to protect every single person around him.

Kouta Kazuraba — full of shining, pure feelings in dazzling silver, as Armored Rider Gaim Ultimate Arms.
Baron — Kaito — let loose a fierce attack with his sword, as Gaim — Kouta — took the attack full-on, without flinching.
Their slashes were no longer even visible to the human eye, and the impact of their swords smashed through the surface of the earth.
A battle to the death over each other's beliefs, and over the future of mankind.
Making full use of everything they had, with all of the might they had, to the point it became purely a battle of their souls.
However, all stories must have an ending, and this battle, too, must reach its conclusion.
"This is the end, Kazuraba…!"
Baron swung his huge sword down from above.
"I'm still…!"
Gaim grabbled the blade directly, and used all of the strength of his body to snap it in two.
Taking the broken sword, he stuck it straight into Baron.
"Gaaaaaaaaah — !"
Gaim's final blow with the broken sword pierced right through Baron.
The battle now had a clear victor.

Kouta Kazuraba, the one who had obtained the future, was shedding tears.
He held Kaito Kumon, who was still breathing faintly, within his arms.
"…Why are you crying?"
"Because I can…even if that means I'm weak…I won't hold back. I'll cry, and I'll keep going while I'm at it."
Kaito's fist hit against Kouta's chest in response.
There was a trace of a smile on his face.
"You…truly are strong."

And thus, the man who had tried to obtain the strongest fruit reached his end.

Such a story of such a fervent battle had reached its end.
The man and the woman holding the Golden Fruit departed from Earth, and headed to a long-distant primordial star to create a new world.
As all of this happened, “he” continued to watch.
“This is not salvation.”
With those words, “he” vanished, as if he were merely an illusion.
As one story came to an end, another had begun.

Chapter 1

Part 1

The Trans-Siberian Highway, spanning Russia from east to west.
Approximately four thousand kilometers east of Moscow, near Krasnoyarsk.
Under the sky washed-out of color, the plains and pine forests spread as far as the eye could see.
The motorway stretched on and on through the deserted landscape.
It had once been called the frontier of Russia, and since then it had become a comparatively well-developed area, but there were still not many cars going through, and only on rare occasions would there be a large trailer carrying supplies or a local farmer's tractor.
On top of the dust-covered asphalt were two motorcycles, emitting high-pitched noises while running at tremendous speed.
Both were supersport models with cowlings.
Both riders were wearing full-face helmets and riding jackets, with their bodies fully bent over, enduring the wind pressure that came from driving at such a high speed.
They constantly looked back at the rearview mirrors, probably to make sure that the police car they'd shaken off over an hour prior wasn't gaining on them.

They were well over 250 kilometers an hour by this point.
It would be impossible for an average police car to tail them at such a speed, and there was no police station close enough to put a car out nearby.
It might have been possible to track them with a helicopter, but even then, it would have been impossible to see them.
They only needed to get 60 kilometers further in order to reach the city of Krasnoyarsk. From there, their plan was to switch over to a car they'd prepared earlier.
But as they rushed down the asphalt like arrows, they suddenly noticed two very small points far ahead of them.
A black passenger car and a silver minivan were parked on the side.
Looking more closely, there was a single person beside them.
A man, who seemed to have come out of the car, did the unthinkable and walked right into the middle of the road, turning to face the approaching motorcycles.
"...!"
Once it had dawned on them who the man was, the two bikers quickly took off their helmets and pulled what looked like strange fist-sized devices from their jacket pockets. They attached the devices, which were decorated to look like tree nuts, to the belts they had strapped around their waists.
Lock on!
Before one could even mentally process the odd synthetic-sounding noise that had just rung out, two round holes[1] opened above them, as if a zipper had opened.
Two giant steel tree nuts fell from the holes and covered their bodies in a flash of light, transforming them into two odd-looking warriors.
Pinecone Arms!
They were Armored Riders[2], ones that had once been referred to as "Kurokage".
With the Shadow Pine spears in their left hands, they pressed down on the

accelerator further and headed towards the figure in front of them, like cavalry on horses.
But the man on the street did not stir an inch, standing there perfectly calmly.
Black eyes and hair. He seemed to be Asian, but with finely chiseled features and a tall, lean body, he looked no worse than any Russian would.
The man reached into his suit and pulled out a device similar to that of the Kurokage troopers, this time resembling a fruit.
“Transform.”
With that, he attached the mechanical fruit — the Melon Energy Lockseed — to the belt he had wrapped around his waist.
Lock on!...Soda!
The belt on his waist — the Genesis Driver — proclaimed those words in a loud voice, and armor descended from above to neatly combine with his figure.
Melon Energy Arms!
The man’s name was Takatora Kureshima.
The pure and beautiful white moonlight of crystallized noble spirit, Armored Rider Zangetsu Shin!
Zangetsu Shin took a step forward with his right foot and twisted his upper body slightly, awaiting the incoming motorcycles.
Held loosely in his lowered right hand was a bifocal weapon with blades on both ends, the Genesis Bow Sonic Arrow, which shot arrows of light.
The motorcycles were approaching him at full speed — and Zangetsu Shin awaited them, with his legs planted firmly. A few seconds passed, and the three of them aligned on the street.
The two bikes separated to his left and right, and, at almost the same time, both spears headed towards Zangetsu Shin.
The spears had been thrown at inhumanly high speeds from motorcycles running at over 250 kilometers an hour, with the inhuman strength that

came from Armored Riders.
Zangetsu Shin skillfully dove out of the way of the attacks that should have been impossible to dodge.
“Haaaaah!”
With a clear cry of fighting spirit, his Sonic Arrow flashed towards the flanks of the Kurokage troopers.
Like a sword drawn so quickly it could be re-sheathed immediately, the blow claimed the consciousness of one of the troopers.
The motorcycle lost control and fell off balance, running into the other one next to it. The motorcycle parts started rolling around.
” — !!”
The remaining Kurokage trooper managed to jump off the motorcycle before it fell, and, after quickly readjusting posture, rushed towards Zangetsu Shin with a shriek of anger.
Even without the speed of a motorcycle, the trooper was still running faster than an average person could see.
Staring back at the Kurokage trooper, Zangetsu Shin attached a Lockseed to the Sonic Arrow and drew back the bowstring.
Melon Energy!
The Sonic Arrow shot out an arrow of light with a dazzling trail behind it, and the arrow hit the Kurokage trooper right on the mark. The trooper collapsed right on the spot, completely limp.
“Okay, get ’em!”
With Zangetsu Shin’s obvious victory, a bunch of men wearing the uniforms of a private security company quickly jumped out of the parked minivan and ran up to the two troopers on the ground.
“Hah…”
Takatora released the transformation and took a deep breath.
Takatora had been involved with the development of the Sengoku Driver from its earliest stages. Since he was more intimately familiar with the

Driver's capabilities than anyone else, he was able to pull off the miracle feat of defeating two Kurokage troopers in the blink of an eye.

"Splendid work, Takatora."

A middle-aged Russian man got out of the car and walked up to him, smiling with admiration.

He was the president of a Russian high-tech venture company, and a long-time friend of Takatora.

"It was all thanks to your information network, Mikhail. We'd have been in much more trouble if we hadn't been able to catch them right here."

"That's nothing, compared to you coming to clean up all of Yggdrasill's business by yourself."

"That's because I'm the one who sowed those seeds myself…"

Takatora picked up the Lockseeds that were left lying on the road.

After the Helheim threat had vanished, Takatora had decided to devote himself to the world's reconstruction.

One of his jobs was to collect all of the Sengoku Drivers and Lockseeds, which had been brought out in all of the confusion when Yggdrasill and its international branches were dismantled.

Takatora had been informed that a robbery had been conducted by Armored Riders in Russia, and so he had immediately come to visit in order to continue his search.

"President Stuglev. We've collected their fingerprints. They are most certainly Inovercy executives," said the security company's commanding officer, reporting in to Stuglev.

The security company investigating the two motorcycle riders was technically a security company, but since all of its employees were former military personnel and former police officers, one could call them a private military company in practice.

Takatora and his associates had determined that the robbery had been carried out by a criminal organization named Inovercy.

According to witness testimony and internal memos, they had four Sengoku Drivers in their possession. Since two had already been retrieved, this made a total of all four of them.

“So you’re finally done with your business in this country.”

“Not yet. I can’t call this resolved until I’ve figured out where and how the Russian Mafia managed to get Sengoku Drivers and Lockseeds.”

All of the Mafia members they’d tracked down had only said “I don’t know, two of our executives got them from somewhere” when asked about the Sengoku Drivers.

If they interrogated the two executives they’d caught today, perhaps they could figure out whether that was true, or whether they’d been hiding something.

“Also, we found these in their wallets…”

The commanding officer handed a black card to Stuglev.

“What’s this, a business card? Hey, Takatora, what do you think?”

It was a very concise business card, with only a name, mobile phone number, and email address.

But when Takatora turned over the card to look at the back, his eyes widened in shock.

The name was scribbled there with a ballpoint pen — “чёрный липа”.

“*Chornyy Lipa*…Black Bodhi.”

Staring at the business card, Takatora muttered the name with a bitter tone.

It was the name of a cult that had caused turmoil in Zawame.

But it was one that should have already lost its leader and vanished.

Why did the Russian Mafia have a business card with such a detestable name on it?

Part 2

“I should have brought summer clothes…”
Takatora had rushed over with all of the clothes he’d brought to Russia, but he was now in a country where the humidity and temperature were unbearable.
It had been around two weeks since the incident on the Trans-Siberian Highway.
Takatora was visiting a small country in southern Asia.
The country was currently in tense social conditions due to a clash between the pro-royal and anti-royal armed factions.
The country had only a single international airport. Takatora was waiting by himself in the airport lobby.
The airport had once been crowded with foreign tourists, but the recent political instability had caused tourism to decline, and the only people who stuck out were businessmen in plain-colored suits and military personnel in camouflage combat uniforms.
An information board hanging from the ceiling flashed a notice that a

passenger plane had arrived from Narita[3], which was quickly followed by passengers emerging from the door into the boarding bridge.
Within that group of passengers, a single person could be seen waving at Takatora.
“Kyah! There you are, Sir Melon! It’s been so long!”
A somewhat menacingly flippant voice echoed through the lobby.
A bunch of people surrounding him had been staring, trying to figure out what was going on, but once they saw who the owner of the voice was, they quickly looked away.
After all, the voice had come from a big man who had wrapped his burly, muscular body with gaudy and flashy leopard print, and had a terrifying and imposing look on his face covered in feminine makeup.
He was the person who could probably be considered the world’s greatest pastry chef, Oren Pierre Alfonzo.
“I apologize for calling you all the way over here.”
“Goodness, it’s nothing! I’d answer your call even if it meant going to the depths of the earth!”
Oren responded to Takatora’s apology with a huge smile on his face.
“You’re the same as ever, I see.”
Noting that he hadn’t changed at all since they’d last met, Takatora smiled wryly back at Oren.
Was this man truly serious about anything?
He had the kind of personality that was difficult for Takatora to understand, but he couldn’t deny that he’d seen Oren display genuine strength several times already.
“So, what do you need me for?”
“Well, about that…I have a car waiting for us outside. We’ll discuss it further on the way to the hotel.”
Takatora quickly glanced around, and it was obvious that he didn’t want to be overheard. He had probably summoned Oren without explaining why for

the exact same reason.
They departed the airport building and headed for the car pickup area. A limousine and a driver were waiting for them there.
"*Splendide!* How lovely."
"It's just a rental."
The limousine was a courtesy car meant for executives, and had been rented from one of Stuglev's business partners. It was custom-made to be bulletproof and soundproof. Naturally, the driver had also gone through a thorough background check.
"You're aware that I'm currently cleaning up the remnants of Yggdrasill, correct?"
Now that the thick armored doors were closed and the limousine was running, Takatora had finally begun to speak.
"Of course, you're collecting all the Sengoku Drivers and Lockseeds, right?"
"Correct."
Takatora conveyed all of the information he'd gathered from circling around Russia.
Around two weeks prior, Takatora had succeeded in recovering the Sengoku Drivers and Lockseeds from the Russian Mafia, but the Mafia members had stubbornly kept their mouths shut about where they'd obtained them from.
The Mafia executives had business cards bearing the name of the person who had given them the Sengoku Drivers and Lockseeds, but the phone number and address listed on the card had been throwaway ones, and the sole clue remaining was the name of a certain person in southern Asia —
Even so, Takatora had carefully chased down the Mafia executives' recent activity and obtained surveillance camera footage, and discovered that the mafia executives were in contact with someone who seemed to be an Asian man.
The man was a former executive of the country's largest foundation, and had been diverting Sengoku Drivers to the Mafia.

“The last foundation commander was locked up in jail, wasn’t he? Something about planning a coup d’etat.”
“Yeah. The foundation had independently learned about Project Ark through its own investigations, and secretly attempted to obtain Sengoku Drivers. It seems they were planning to perform a takeover of the country with Armored Riders. Once the last foundation commander fell, the young scion of a noble family, named Shapur, took over the foundation and is now working to rebuild it.”
“So you’re saying this foundation is manufacturing Sengoku Drivers and Lockseeds.”
“No, Shapur is trying to keep the foundation clean. He’s not up to anything suspicious.”
“Huh. Impressive for such a young man. I wonder what sort of kid he is?”
“…Black Bodhi is manufacturing the Sengoku Drivers.”
“Black Bodhi…isn’t that the cult that was causing a huge fuss in Zawame?”
“Yeah. The leader’s name was Kugai Kudou. A former Yggdrasill researcher.”
Upon hearing the name Yggdrasill, Oren’s expression suddenly changed.
“He lost his life during a research accident, but reappeared some years later, formed Black Bodhi, and used his own Lockseeds to perform terror attacks on Yggdrasill. Back then, I’m sure Ryouma and I had put an end to him…”
“*Pardon?* Wait a second, I don’t get it. You’re saying that Kudou guy came back from the dead twice?”
“It’s impossible, that would be absurd.”
Takatora answered Oren’s question with immediate denial.
“He probably managed to survive the accident somehow. This time, it has to be someone running the organization in Kudou’s place.”
Kugai was the kind of person who always appeared in unexpected places at unexpected times, but, in the end, he was a human being, and there was no way he could possibly undo his own death.
At least, that was what Takatora believed.

Oren nodded and snapped Takatora back into the conversation. “Well, I’m sure a cult would love to dream up some nonsense about resurrecting the dead or something. But I’ve read something about this somewhere, I heard there was some former leader from the anti-royal faction who’d gotten kicked off alongside the last foundation commander, and that he was connected to Black Bodhi.”

An Armored Rider could easily stand toe-to-toe against an entire armed group by itself.

For something like an anti-royal armed faction trying to recover from the brink, the Sengoku Driver was the kind of irresistible item that they would do anything for.

They were likely to be providing shelter and funding to Black Bodhi in exchange for Sengoku Drivers.

“No matter what…”

Takatora reaffirmed his words with a strong tone, as he stared at the seemingly idyllic scenery passing by through the car window.

“No matter what, we absolutely must not allow the Armored Riders to become tools of war.”

“*Beau!* What a face of anguish! What eyes with strong belief! How lovely!”

Oren, acting in his usual manner, caused Takatora to unconsciously relax his facial expression.

“So, Oren, I have a favor to ask of you…”

“…So in other words, you need the service of the skills I had before I became a *pâtissier*, correct?”

Prior to his training as a pastry chef, Oren had joined the Foreign Legion in order to acquire French nationality, and had a history of traveling around the world as a mercenary.

“If I want to destroy Black Bodhi’s facilities and prevent Armored Riders from being used in civil war, I need your experience as a mercenary and the help of your former mercenary colleagues.”

“*Oui!* Leave it to me!”
Oren thumped his own chest.
“I had a feeling it’d be something like this, so I’ve already dropped a line to my old friends. I think I should go ahead and call them in directly.”
“That helps me greatly. Also, there is this.”
Takatora picked up an attaché case that had been lying at his feet, and handed it to Oren. Oren opened the case to see what was inside, and a bold smile spread across his face.
“Goodness, this, this is…”
“I recovered it from the remnants of the European Yggdrasill branch. Please make good use of it.”
Oren pulled out the contents from within the case — a Sengoku Driver and a Durian Lockseed.
“*Très bien!* I haven’t been able to show you my splendid battle skills in so long.”
As Oren said this, his facial expression was not one of a pastry chef, but that of a mercenary thoroughly experienced in war.

Part 3

As soon as they reached the hotel, Takatora and Oren got to work.
The two pretended to be eccentric wealthy foreign visitors and rented a vacation house in the mountains near the capital, one that seemed more like an abandoned house more than anything. Of course, they intended to actually make it into their base of operations.
There were no residential houses nearby, and there was a large garden that they could use as training grounds, so it was perfect for their purposes.
Oren's former fellow mercenaries arrived from different countries in response to his call.
If they were to arrive at the house all at once, they would stand out too much, so they were instead instructed to disperse, start from the neighboring area, then head in one by one on foot.
"It's been such a long time, Captain Oren!"
"Have you been doing well, Raymond?"
"I'm so happy to get to fight with you again, Mr. Oren."
"I could say the same, Scythe. I'm counting on your help."

“Hey, Oren! Why’d you call me all the way down to this kinda country? We gonna start off with some kinda pointless operation?”
“Oh, my, you’re still alive, Isaac. Don’t worry, we’ll prepare the most suitable sort of battlefield for you.”
Oren warmly received all of his old friends one by one. It was a long-awaited reunion for them.
The mercenaries were of different races and ages, and different kinds of people as well. Some were working as military personnel, but there was someone who looked more suited to being a corporate worker at a desk than on the battlefield with a weapon, and someone who looked like a giant outlaw with tattoos all over his body.
But despite all of their differences, the one thing they all had in common was that they had utmost respect for Oren. And on the flip side, it was clear that Oren trusted them deeply in return.
It was not a military relationship of superiors and lower ranks, but more like that of friends tied together with strong bonds. Thanks to that, they were also able to carry on conversation in a very blunt, straightforward manner.
For example —
“Let me introduce you. This is our client, Takatora.”
The moment Oren began to introduce them, the soldiers started raving with speculation.
“Are you the captain’s new lover?”
“Nah, it’s totally one-sided, isn’t it?”
“Why, you…I’ll get you back for that and train you until you die!”
— It was like that.
More and more soldiers were piling in, but although they had enough to pull the operation off, the problem was in procuring weapons for them.
It would be possible to obtain weapons via the Japanese black market, but the risk of the police and military catching onto them was too high.
Instead, Oren contacted a smuggler in a certain other country, one who owed

a large debt to him, and had weapons and ammunition brought over from abroad via cargo ship. They managed to retrieve the weapons at midnight. Fortunately for them, thanks to the local political instability, security was not very tight and their measures against offshore smuggling were weak.
At the same time, they also managed to pin down the location of the Black Bodhi hideout.
A former foundation executive had given them a tip along the lines of “near a lake in the southwest…”, but the precise location was still unclear.
“Since Black Bodhi is likely to be working alongside the anti-royal armed faction, it’s also likely that their hideout has guards around it. We’ll need to confirm.”
“That’s fine, I’ve already made arrangements for that.”
Oren also had a long relationship with an expert in information gathering, so they had been carrying out their own separate investigation into the Black Bodhi hideout, as well as their relationship with the armed faction.
Around the exact time the final mercenary arrived at the house, Oren had also obtained the results of the information stakeout.
“Their hideout should be here.”
After receiving the investigation report, Oren pulled out a tablet device, pulled up an aerial photograph of the capital’s suburbs, and pointed out one area.
There, a cluster of trees surrounded a lake. The trees were so overgrown that it was impossible to even make out anything like a building in there.
“I can’t tell anything from this picture alone.”
“Don’t be in such a rush.”
Oren opened another window in front of it, showing a closer picture within the cluster of trees.
There were white metal panels, like those one would see at construction sites, all lined up in a row. It was impossible to see what was inside from there.

The panels were placed far too neatly for a construction site, and there were countless surveillance cameras peeking in from above.
There were more photos taken from different directions, and, judging by the tree angles, it could be deduced that the panels were surrounding a square-shaped area, around 200 meters on each side.
“It’s bigger than I’d expected…”
“Look at this photo. You can see the interior here.”
Several dozen photos in, one portion of one panel had been opened on the sides to allow a truck into the premises, and it was possible to get a peek inside.
Takatora brought his face closer to the tablet screen.
There were multiple prefabricated buildings lined up on unpaved ground, with multiple people around it.
The people there were not wearing military uniforms, or any kind of uniform at all. They were all in plainclothes…but something felt off about them.
“Don’t you think it’s strange?…They’re all holding something, aren’t they?”
“Lockseeds.”
Takatora recalled his encounters with the Black Bodhi cultists in Zawame. All of them had been holding Pomegranate Lockseeds, all manufactured by Black Bodhi.
According to Ryouma Sengoku, the inventor of the Sengoku Driver — and also once a friend of Takatora — the Pomegranate Lockseed had the ability to send its holder into a trance and brainwash them.
The people in the photo may not have joined Black Bodhi of their own will, but rather may have been manipulated by someone who was acting in place of Kugai Kudou…
“Is this a security guard?”
After flipping through more of the photos, Takatora saw one with a person wearing a combat uniform and hanging a rifle from his shoulder.
“Looking at the posture, it’s a trained soldier.”

“So they do have anti-royal faction members guarding the place.”
The pictures alone indicated at least three soldiers in the facility.
A secret facility would likely not want soldiers to frequently come and go, so it was best to assume that there were quite a lot of soldiers, including potential reserves, on the premises.
“That’s rather worrisome.”
I want to destroy only the facility, and do my best to avoid harming laymen as much as possible — that was what Takatora had hoped for, but it would be difficult to hold back if armed soldiers were involved.
And that would especially be the case if the soldiers transformed into Armored Riders and challenged them directly.
But on the other hand, if we hesitate... Takatora pondered.
“Oh, also, I have another important piece of information regarding the anti-royal faction.”
“Important information?”
Takatora looked up from the tablet.
“It seems that the former commander, the one currently in prison, will soon be moved to the capital to be put on trial. The anti-royal faction plans to launch an attack and recapture him there.”
“Which means they’re probably going to bring out Armored Riders, right?”
“Most likely.”
A major military operation. If they were receiving Sengoku Drivers from Black Bodhi, there was no doubt they would be using them for the sake of this recapture plan.
Naturally, the pro-royal faction might be preparing for such an attack, but they probably had no expectation that they’d be fighting against an army wearing invincible armor.
“*Chance!* We’ve got a lucky opportunity.”
What the hell kind of chance... Takatora was halfway into the thought when he realized what Oren meant.

It was clear that the anti-royal faction had very little fighting power. Of course, they also had no way to move a large amount of soldiers. As a result, they were likely to get the soldiers in the Black Bodhi hideout to be involved in their attack plan.
“The hideout’s security is likely to be weak, but…if they’re planning to use Armored Riders in their attack plan, we can’t just let it be.”
“Yes, of course. I was thinking the same. So we’ll attack the hideout and take down their Armored Riders.”
Takatora was surprised at Oren’s confident words.
“Do we have a shot at it?”
There were more than twenty mercenaries at the house, but no matter how hardened they were as veterans, they were far too small of a group to carry out a two-pronged strategy.
“We may not have enough to stop the entire attack plan, but our main goal is to destroy the Armored Riders. If things go well, we can at least pull that off.”
Oren went to the door and called out to the soldier in the neighboring room.
“Hey, can someone come and bring it out?”
Eventually, a soldier came in with a large aluminum case.
“It’s a VKT Lahti L-39.”
Inside the case was a huge firearm, a striking one that came off more like a giant lump of iron.
“An artillery weapon, huh?”
Takatora’s eyes were wide at how huge it was.
“It’s a 20mm caliber, so you could say that.”
Oren stroked the barrel of the anti-tank rifle, which was slightly red and rusty.
“It’s been remodeled so modern sniper scopes can fit it. It’s an antique, but quite powerful. You could blow up an Armored Rider even from a whole two kilometers away.”
Armored Riders had incredibly outstanding offensive and defensive power.

They were particularly strong in close combat. But they weren't invincible.
Oren had come up with the following strategy:
Since they already knew where the armed faction's secret base was, they would follow the assault raid, snipe them from afar as soon as they started transforming into Armored Riders, and destroy them.
"We'll use the 20mm-caliber Lahti and the 12/7mm M82 for the Armored Riders before they attack. We'll withdraw to our hideouts around the city before the general troops strike back. Also, if we miss a shot, we'll set a trap for any Armored Riders who come after us…I think that'll be enough."
"If you say it's possible, I'll believe you. I just want to confirm one thing."
"Oh, what's that?"
"Even if we snipe them, we don't actually know how many Armored Riders the anti-royal faction has in store. We may have to send in quite a large number for that…"
"Yes, we'll need backup for our snipers, so we'll need people to protect them and secure their retreat. Almost all of our troops here will be directed towards attacking the Armored Riders."
"So then what about the hideout?"
"Our remaining personnel will head there."
"Remaining personnel…?"
"Sir Melon and I will be attacking the hideout ourselves. That alone should be more than enough power for our purposes, right?"
As Oren said that, a savage smile was on his face.

Part 4

There were two weeks left before the previous commander would be escorted to the capital.
The assault raid would naturally take place then, so in order to prepare for the time being, Takatora and the others planned out their attack strategy, working intensely on training and battle simulations.
And thus, the day arrived —
It was before dawn. Deep in the mountains, so dark there wasn't even moonlight, the mercenaries prepared for their departure.
Several of their scouts had already made their way around the armed group's base and the Black Bodhi hideout, so if anything went against their plans, they would be able to get back in contact easily.
Once preparations were finished, the mercenaries dispatched in three trucks to head to their predetermined attack points.
"Time for us to go, too."
"Yeah."
Takatora and Oren boarded an old four-wheel drive car and headed out separately from the mercenary trucks, heading for the Black Bodhi hideout.
If they went directly in a straight line from the house in the mountains to the

hideout in the forest, the distance would be around 60 kilometers.
Since they were tracking something down, they had to make sure to use a highway with proper exits, but the early morning had very little traffic, so they arrived at the destination in barely over an hour.
There was still no sign of the sun on the horizon, but the sky was slowly getting brighter.
“All right, time to be careful…”
They parked the four-wheel drive car in an inconspicuous location, and walked into the forest.
Takatora and Oren had scouted out the location within the clump of trees in advance, and confirmed that the surveillance cameras had only gone as far as slightly surrounding the Black Bodhi hideout. They’d parked the car just barely outside of its perimeter, but they still needed to be careful.
“In battle, one must be bold, but one must also determine the precise timing to exert their power.”
Takatora recalled the words Oren had repeatedly said during their simulation and training.
As they went deeper into the forest, the trees became denser and darker, to the point it was difficult to even see a few meters ahead of them.
Relying on mobile GPS to guide them through the cluster of trees, trying not to get lost within it, they eventually reached a small hill.
A hill that barely rose over its surroundings in flat terrain. An excellent place to keep an eye on the Black Bodhi hideout.
“Good work.”
“Nothing seems wrong from here.”
A scout, who had been planted earlier in advance, enthusiastically submitted his report to Oren, and departed to join the other mercenaries heading to the city.
Hiding in the tall weeds that covered the hill, Takatora and Oren turned their binoculars towards the hideout.

“Perfect timing. They’re right about to leave.”
The Black Bodhi hideout emerged like a fort within the dark cluster of trees. A portion of the panels that had surrounded the site opened to the left and right, and dozens of military vehicles came out through them.
The soldiers stationed in the hideout were setting out to join the assault on the convoy.
Once the last one had departed the hideout, the gate closed and the cluster of trees fell silent once again.
As soon as the military vehicles’ lights had completely vanished from view, Takatora took a black airplane-shaped drone out of his backpack, quickly assembled it, and gently pushed it into the sky.
The drone passed through the entwined treetops and soared into the sky over the cluster of trees.
It had been absolutely necessary to understand everything about the area when attacking the hideout, but because there was a high possibility of being caught, they hadn’t used it up until this point.
“Come here, come here, we can see the whole thing now~”
On the tablet, which was serving as the remote control for the drone, they could see a full view of the hideout taken from the sky.
“The prefabricated buildings near the entrance serve as an observation post. There’s dormitories lined up in the back.”
“There’s probably a factory in this building here, the one with all the pipes and electric wires. Oren, which plan should we use in our attack?”
“Hmm…”
Oren stared intently at the bird’s eye view footage.
“With this setup…perhaps Plan A or C. But there’s a possibility they might notice our attack pattern, so…”
Oren pondered the situation with his fingertips to his mouth, and, after a while, finally settled on a decision.
“I’ve got it. We’ll go with Plan Zero.”

“The hell is that? You’ve never mentioned that before.”
“Plan Zero means we change our plan as we go along.”
“…”
They had discussed and carefully scrutinized more than a dozen attack plans in advance. And now here Oren was saying they were going to throw all of them down the drain — Takatora was at a loss for words.
“Oh, is there a problem?”
This man is truly difficult to understand, thought Takatora.
If Oren’s words of “be bold, but have precise timing” were to be taken to the logical extreme, this did seem to be the appropriate approach, but even so…
But this was no time to argue. Takatora had no choice but to trust in Oren’s judgment.
Takatora sighed and nodded.
“All right, go ahead.”
“It’ll be fine, leave it to me.”
They weaved their way through the trees down the hill and stopped right before the hideout’s surveillance cameras would catch them.
“Let’s attack them with full force here. If we take our sweet time in getting in there, it’ll defeat the whole point of a surprise attack.”
“Do whatever you want.”
Once they stepped into the open space, they threw out any pretense of trying to hide, and approached the gate where the military vehicle had departed earlier.
Countless numbers of surveillance cameras from all over the hideout turned right towards them at once, and a searchlight came down on them from the top of the gate.
“It’s party time!”
Takatora and Oren raised their Lockseeds, as if showing them off to the person running the surveillance cameras, and shouted.
“Transform!!”

A flash of light cut through the darkness in the forest, and two Armored Riders appeared from it.

Melon Energy Arms!

Zangetsu Shin, an Armored Rider like a knight. And —

Durian Arms!

Armored Rider Bravo, a modern gladiator who embodied Oren's ferocious fighting spirit.

"Let's go!!"

Bravo pulled out his vicious-looking twin swords, the Duri Saws, with a myriad of thorns sticking out from them.

The Duri Saws slashing left and right tore through the metal gate like thin paper and blew the pieces around.

Zangetsu Shin and Bravo headed straight into the hideout.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Holding his swords, Bravo casually looked around the area.

But, contrary to his expectations, there was no response from within the hideout.

The cultists who had emerged from the inner buildings seemed unconcerned, staring back at them with lifeless eyes.

"Goodness, are you not awake yet? If you don't want to get hurt, throw aside your weapons and surrender. We won't attack if you don't resist."

Bravo had lost his momentum and was set off-beat.

Suddenly, the cultist that was closest to Bravo started to rush towards him.

"Ah, so you've made your decision at the last moment…"

In the cultist's hand was a faintly shining Lockseed…

"Watch out!"

Zangetsu Shin pushed Bravo aside.

A moment after that, the cultist suddenly exploded, right where Bravo had been standing.

"Gyah!?"

Staggering in the shockwave of the explosion, Bravo let out a shriek.
“Be careful, they’re going to self-destruct!”
“S-So that’s what’s going on…”
The Black Bodhi cultists were carrying Lockseeds that were brainwashing them, and even turning them into living bombs.
Oren had heard about this earlier, but hadn’t expected them to resort to self-destruction so easily.
As if following the first one’s lead, the other cultists started rushing towards Zangetsu Shin and Bravo one after another, setting off the self-destruct each time.
“Dear goodness!”
Zangetsu Shin blew back the cultists as they tried to jump Bravo behind him.
“We just need to stun them before they self-destruct.”
The cultists were willingly letting themselves explode without hesitation, but there was a narrow window of time between them approaching and them blowing themselves up.
Zangetsu Shin knocked the cultists out one by one, paying close attention to the momentary time gaps.
“All right, I’ll join!”
Perhaps it was thanks to the Lockseeds, but the cultists were moving far more quickly than the average person could. But they were still no match for Oren, a seasoned specialist in battle.
“Hyah! Take that! How’s that?”
They defeated the cultists pouring and jumping in one after another, with steady motions, as if they were dancing.
“They keep piling in. We’ll just have to break away and head to the factory!”
Shaking off the crowd of cultists that were converging on them like zombies, the two Armored Riders headed for the factory-like building that they’d checked earlier, and took down all of the cultists wandering near the entrance before entering the building.

Contrary to what the shabby exterior of the prefabricated building had suggested, the interior was more like a large company's research facility. Both sides of the corridor were covered in glass and extended all the way to the back, where a hydroponic cultivation facility spanned, illuminated by white LED lights.

"Could these plants be…"

"They're from Helheim."

Strange plants cultivated on well-ordered shelves — there was no doubt about it, they were Helheim plants bearing Lockseed fruits.

"There were still so many of these left…"

"When the Cracks started opening all around the world, they must have collected some and started cultivating them."

A whole half of the building seemed to be dedicated to growing Helheim plants.

A corridor extended through the hydroponic cultivation area. The door at the end was an air shower room made to prevent dust and dirt from entering, the kind you would normally see at factories with precision machines.

"Looks like the factory is ahead."

Zangetsu Shin walked up to the door to the air shower room.

Just then, what seemed to be a portion of the wall opened up in front of the air shower room, and four Kurokage troopers jumped out to ambush Zangetsu Shin.

"…!"

Zangetsu Shin was taken off guard by the ambush for a second, but Bravo immediately jumped between Zangetsu Shin and the Kurokage troopers to repel their spear attacks.

"Not so fast!"

The Kurokage troopers were set off balance by their spears being diverted, and Bravo attempted to slash back at them with his blades. But the troopers quickly pulled back their spears and retreated from Bravo's reach.

Unlike the cultists, who moved much like puppets, these were properly trained fighters.
“Hmm, I see they still had a bit left in them?”
“Looks like they had some remaining soldiers here.”
The four Kurokage troopers were circling the area with proper distance taken. Zangetsu Shin put their backs together and stared back at them.
“Hoho, seems like we’ll finally get to have a decent fight.”
“You seem rather calm about all of this.”
“Well, my dear Sir Melon’s got my back, so I feel much more at ease.”
“Why, you…”
“What about it?”
“No, it’s nothing…let’s go!”
Whack!
The Kurokage troopers all moved simultaneously, as if perfectly timed.
A breathtaking blow, and a skillfully coordinated attack.
They must have trained very diligently to refine their skills as Armored Riders.
But they were still terribly outclassed.
Takatora and Oren, who had refined their combat skills in the Armored Rider battles in Zawame, would not fall to such half-hearted attacks so easily.
“Hah!!”
Zangetsu Shin’s Sonic Arrow shook.
“Hyah!!”
Bravo’s Duri Saws scattered sparks.
They were outnumbered by the Kurokage troopers, but in only a few seconds, the troopers were completely overwhelmed and knocked to the floor.
“Didn’t even stand a chance.”
Zangetsu Shin and Bravo were still breathing steadily, not even slightly disturbed.

“All right, time to keep going while there aren’t any reinforcements.”
Beyond the unpowered air shower room were dozens of rows of production lines with conveyor belts.
They seemed to have been untouched for a while, and the conveyor belts and workbenches were covered in a thin layer of dust.
“It’s a full-on manufacturing factory. I wonder how many Drivers and Lockseeds they’ve made with this already?” muttered Oren, looking back at Zangetsu Shin, who was taken aback in shock. “This is bad. If they managed to make more Sengoku Drivers than we’d thought, then all of our friends out there…”
“No, it’ll be fine.”
Zangetsu Shin was looking through a notebook that had been placed in a corner of the production line.
“Looking at the yield table, it seems most of what they produced was Lockseeds, and there weren’t many Sengoku Drivers.”
“Whew, that’s a relief.”
Bravo stroked his chest in relief, but yelped in shock when he saw the numbers written in the notebook.
“That’s the number of Lockseeds they manufactured, right? Ones, tens, hundreds…tens of thousands!?”
“That’s only for one month. The total is…around a hundred thousand.”
“That many!?”
The Sengoku Drivers that were designed for Project Ark gave their wearers the ability to transform Helheim fruits into Lockseeds. This factory was made to do it more efficiently and on a larger scale.
Yggdrasill had planned to produce one billion Sengoku Drivers, so the number of a hundred thousand in itself was not surprising to Takatora, but he was surprised that such large-scale production was even possible at such a remote facility.
“Where could they have hidden so many Lockseeds?”

The back of the factory had a space to temporarily store completed Lockseeds, but there were only a few forklift pallets and cardboard boxes lying around, and there was no sign of the actual Lockseeds that would be filling them.
“They must have already shipped them out somewhere…That’s the only thing I can think of.”
After undoing his transformation, Takatora silently headed to the corner of the factory.
In the wide center was a single area, isolated from its surroundings by a partition.
Office desks were lined up on the partition, with desktop computers and large displays.
Takatora turned on one of the computers, but was greeted with a message prompting him to enter a password before he could do anything else.
“A password, huh? Give me a moment…”
Oren pulled out a USB memory stick from his chest pocket and plugged it into the port of the computer.
“What’s that?”
“I had a feeling this might happen, so I asked our intelligence officer to make this for me. If the security isn’t too tight, it should break through easily…see, there we are!”
As Oren had said, the password input screen had already cleared up, and the screen changed to a basic one with icons lined up in a row.
“There should be some data about the shipping address where they sent the Lockseeds.”
Takatora haphazardly opened the randomly arranged folders and checked the contents.
But there was a huge amount of data stored on the server, and moreover, the files were named with the local language, so it was difficult to perform a search.

As he was playing around with things, Oren, who was watching the surroundings behind Takatora, caught notice of something unusual and spoke up.
“Something smells strange…It smells like smoke.”
Looking more closely, a large amount of smoke was entering the factory from the air shower room.
“Fire! Someone’s set the factory on fire!”
But Takatora was staring, frozen, at the display. The screen had a drawing of a complex mechanical device on it.
“What’s wrong? What’s this drawing?”
“It says ‘Saver System’, but…this is undoubtedly the same as the Scalar System.”
“What did you say!?”
Oren had only heard about it afterwards, but he knew the name well.
The Scalar System was a terrifying weapon of mass destruction, which had been installed in the Yggdrasill Corporation headquarters in Zawame.
Why did a Black Bodhi facility have a blueprint for the exact same thing?
Takatora was trapped within his own burning thoughts, from the shock of an unexpected reunion with such a detestable thing from the past.
“Sir Melon!”
Oren’s voice snapped him back to reality.
“The building’s on fire. We have to hurry up and get out of here!”

Black smoke was rising from the cluster of trees into the early morning sky.
The flames from the Black Bodhi factory spread to the surrounding buildings, one after another, and the entire hideout became a sea of fire.
On the hill where he had scouted earlier during the assault raid, Takatora gazed back at what had happened.
Oren, who was standing next to him, received reports from his radios informing them that the mercenaries had successfully pushed back the

anti-royal faction's Armored Riders.
"So our mission is complete, then."
"Not yet. I have to track down where the Lockseeds were transported to. And as for that blueprint…"
"The one that said 'Saver System', right?"
"There's a possibility they may be building that somewhere out there."
"Let's analyze the data further when we get back."
Oren began to walk out of the forest. Takatora started to follow him — and then.

" — the standstill we once reached is finally proceeding once again. The time of salvation is near."

Startled by the echoing voice he'd heard from behind him, Takatora looked back in a panic.
"Who's there!?"
But there was not a single person there.
"*Qu'est-ce qu'il ya?* Is something wrong?"
"…Did you hear a voice just now?"
"Huh?"
"No, never mind…"
But it was too clear to be passed off as simply hearing things.
And moreover, the voice was a familiar one to Takatora.
It was a voice very similar to that of a man who should have disappeared from the world alongside Ryouma Sengoku.
The leader of Black Bodhi — Kugai Kudou.

Intermission

The first, most immediate sensation was color.
He was being swallowed by every kind of color in existence.
After that was every other sensation. Sound. Scent. Touch. Visceral sensation — no, everything. Everything was engulfing him.
Everything, a mixture of everything, enveloping him into chaos and beating around him like a storm.
The same state, recurring eternally — and yet all still in a single moment.
The infinite colors eventually condensed into shapes. What had once been an explosion of color had now become a myriad of different scenes.
Taking all of it in, he understood what the flood of sensations was. He had come to understand everything.
Everything before his eyes — everything he could feel was “the world”. Every space and every time was unfolding in front of him.
He was engulfed in delight and ecstasy. Now, at this very moment, he was near omniscience. Having lost his vessel of flesh, his spirit was now soaring, and he had surpassed humanity.
The colors exploded yet again. Another violent rush of sensations. And then, silence.

When his consciousness formed together again, a field of battle was before him.
Fighters, like warriors, fighting on the field. All were wearing familiar devices on their waists.
Sengoku Drivers. A system developed by a certain young genius. The reason for him being in this position. The warriors there must have been the Armored Riders from the original project.
But there were more as well. There were others engaged in combat, wearing masks and armors. On their waists were devices that resembled Sengoku Drivers, but seemed to use different systems unfamiliar to him.
“The World of Bujin — or would that be the best way to call it?”
Hearing a sudden voice out of nowhere, he turned back in shock. At some point, a strange man had appeared there.
“When possibilities converge, you occasionally see a world like this come forth. You could say it’s like a fleeting illusion.”
The man spoke casually, as if they were already acquainted. But now that he had transcended humanity, he could sense a strange presence from the man.
This man was not human. No, this man was not even a living being to begin with. It was a supernatural presence, or a concept. A god, or a devil, or something else.
“…What are you?”
“Well, there’s no point in asking me for a name. The only thing I can say is that I’m me, and nothing else. If we have to force one…I was once called ‘the serpent’.”
For a moment, the man seemed to appear to be a snake…or something along those lines. A serpent of paradise, one that misled humans and offered them fruits.
But even that perception would not be correct, either. This man’s true form was something beyond the reach of human understanding. It would

probably be impossible for any human to truly understand. Even for him, who had transcended humanity, it would probably still be impossible.
“But I’m not the one who matters here. It doesn’t matter who I am. The important part is…you’re here in front of me right now, Kugai Kudou.”
“How do you know my name…”
He — Kugai — had asked a question, but the man did not answer it. Instead, he pointed at Kugai’s waist.
“The power of Helheim, the power you used in the initial Sengoku Driver experiment…you call them Lockseeds, correct? Ryouma Sengoku attempted to use them to simulate the Golden Fruit. As a result, you lost your life as a human being, and now your existence has reached that of a higher plane, like that of the ‘Woman of the Beginning’. Fascinating, isn’t it? For the time being, as far as humanity is concerned, you’ve become much like Kougane.”
“…Kougane?”
Kugai had absolutely no idea what this man was saying at all. But he did realize one thing: this man, the one calling himself a “serpent”, was attempting to guide him towards something.
“You now have power equal to that of an Overlord. How will you use that power?”
“I…”
“If you intend to see evolution through to its end, I will guide you towards its potential. Come, accept this: the power of Bujin and Genesis.”
The man raised his hand, offering a device that seemed to be an expansion for the Sengoku Driver, and a lock that resembled the blood-colored orange.
Seeing the extended hand — the serpent’s temptation — he, Kugai Kudou, would…
“…That’s right. I’ll always be watching over all of you.”
And the serpent laughed.

Chapter 2

Part 1

The encroachment of Helheim. The invasion of Megahex.
After overcoming multiple disastrous incidents in a row, the city of Zawame was gradually progressing in reconstruction, and more and more people were coming and going with cheer — or, at least, that was how it was supposed to be.
But it would not be long before the city fell into turbulence once more.
“Stop! Please stop!”
It started in the central heart of Zawame.
On a weekend in a busy downtown area, a woman’s shriek suddenly pierced through the air.
A man in a suit, who seemed to have been accompanying her, had been severely assaulted, and was surrounded by two other men.
The other men appeared to be those of a so-called street gang.
“What, givin’ up already?”
“That’s what happens when ya pick a fight with us in this town, don’tcha know? Hey, get up!”

The ruckus had started when the man had lashed out at them for insulting the woman accompanying him, but he'd fallen completely to their mercy and was unable to put up any resistance.

"Someone, please, help!"

The woman had no recourse of fighting back violently against the men in front of her, and was desperately seeking help from the surrounding people passing by, but…everyone around her was too afraid of getting involved, and no one stepped in to interfere.

"Shut the hell up, quit with the whinin'!"

As the woman kept screaming desperately, one of the men yanked and grabbed her arm.

"Stop it, don't touch me!"

"I told ya to shut the hell up!"

"Gyah!"

Even with so many eyes on them in the middle of a busy downtown street, the gangsters pushed on with violence.

It was a strange sight for a city that should have returned to peace.

"Hey, you over there. What do you think you're doing!?"

One of the people passing by had reached their limit and reported it to the police, and two officers rushed in from a nearby police box and prodded through the crowd.

Normally, this would have settled the issue.

But even though they could see the police officers approaching, the men made no attempt to escape and simply continued their assault.

"Hey, we told you to stop!"

"Argh, don't get in the way!!"

The men completely ignored the police officers' warnings, and even turned on the police officers themselves and started trying to punch them.

"You…!"

Seeing resistance, the police officers took out their batons from their belt

cases and swung them down in their direction.
They were expandable police batons intended for self-defense, but they should have had enough power to strike fear into bare-handed thugs.
But even despite being hit with the batons, the men seemed to feel no pain and kept waving their fists towards the police officers.
“What’s with these guys…!?”
The police officers worked in the downtown area, and were particularly specialized in breaking up fights and disputes there.
They had extensive experience in subduing gangsters and drunks, but something was different about their opponents today.
They were unusually aggressive, and even when they were beaten down, they didn’t seem to feel any pain…
It was as if they had taken some kind of drug, and there was no doubt they were incredibly dangerous opponents to have.
Eventually, the police officers were backed into a corner to the point the men there were thoroughly beating them up.
“Hey, let’s beat ’em until they die!”
“Sounds fun, let’s do it!”
The men’s eyes were tinted with the color of insanity.
Feeling that their own lives were in danger now, the police officers pulled their pistols out from their holsters and turned them towards the men.
“D-Don’t move…!”
It was a reflexive action from how deep the crisis had gotten, but they’d intended it purely as a warning and had no intention to shoot. But…
“Oh, it’s just a pistol.”
“C’mon, go ahead, shoot!”
Even with pistols pointed straight at them, the men showed no fear whatsoever.
Their eyes were still dull and distorted, and drool was spilling from their mouths as they lurched closer.

“Eeeeeek…!”
Giving into his terror, one of the police officers accidentally pulled the trigger.
The gunshot echoed through the downtown area, and there were audible screams from the civilians looking on.
The bullet from the revolver hit the man’s shoulder right when he was about to fully converge on the policeman. The blood from the wound dyed his shirt red.
At the moment of impact, the man staggered for a moment, but he seemed to completely ignore the bleeding from his shoulder, and gave off an ominous laugh.
“Heh heh heh…too bad, doesn’t hurt at all.”
He took out something that looked like a decorative charm and showed it to the police officer.
“As long as I’ve got this, I’m invincible!”
There was no doubt about it; the man was holding a Lockseed, an item that was once popular among young people in Zawame.
“We’re the strongest, y’know. Ya can’t kill us.”
“These guys are insane!”
The police officers had no choice but to continue staggering backwards.
But at that moment, a slingshot round flew in out of nowhere and struck the Lockseed out of the man’s hand.
“Huh!?”
“Got it! Let’s go, Zack!”
The voice came from a young man standing behind the onlookers, wearing a red and black coat and holding a slingshot.
While the gangster was distracted, another person jumped out right in front of him.
“Nice one, Peko!”
Just like the one with the slingshot, he was a young man in a red and black

coat, and had a stern look on his face.
They were well-known among many in Zawame; their coats were the uniforms for the dance team “Baron”, which was famous within the city.
The young man named “Zack” quickly threw a punch at the man who had dropped the Lockseed.
The man, the same one who had spat in the face of being shot by a gun, lost consciousness in an instant and fell over on the spot.
“Zack!? No way, you’re the one who crushed Neo Baron…!”
Zack looked back at the other man, who was now trembling in fear, and pointed his fist at him.
“Come get me if you want. I’m not letting you get away with this in our city.”
“Don’t get cocky, ya brat!”
Zack deftly avoided the man’s sharp punches aimed at him, one after another. But…
“Hm? Ya tryin’ to do somethin’?”
“Gh…nothing’s landing at all, huh…”
It was the same as before; the man was attacking with no sign of pain.
In terms of sheer physical strength, Zack was stronger, but against an opponent devoid of pain or fatigue, he was slowly being pushed into a corner.
“Zack!”
Zack’s friend, Peko, started shooting from his slingshot to help him, but there was no effect.
The gangster, pleased at his own triumph, laughed loudly.
“Gyahaha! Long as I’ve got this Lockseed, I ain’t losin’!”
“Hmmm…you mean *this*, right?”
“…!?”
A small and lanky young man had managed to sneak up behind him. In contrast to the gangster, he came off as someone who had been raised in a high-class family. He certainly didn’t seem the type to be suited for fighting at all…but his expression was sharp, and he gave off an unusually shrewd

impression.
The young man raised his hand to show what he had to the gangster — and in it was a red Lockseed.
Seeing what he was holding there, the man quickly checked his clothes pocket…and realized something was missing.
“Ya little…when did ya…!?”
He hadn’t even finished what he was about to say when Zack gave him a solid punch from behind, and he lost consciousness on the spot.

“You saved us there, Micchy.”
Giving his thanks, Zack approached the small young man — Mitsuzane Kureshima.
Mitsuzane had an intense expression as he stared at the Lockseed he’d confiscated.
“I knew it. It’s *this* Lockseed. It’s the one my brother told me about.”
“…The Pomegranate Lockseed?”
The gangsters had been holding red Lockseeds — Pomegranate Lockseeds, which had originally been manufactured by Black Bodhi. Why were they circulating between street gangsters, and why now, of all times…?
“Would be nice to ask them about it, but…looks like we’re out of time.”
A police car siren was audible from a distance. They were most likely reinforcements, sent in after reports about the gangsters had circulated.
“We’ll be in for trouble if they drag us into this, so let’s hurry up and get out of here,” said Mitsuzane, calling out to Zack and Peko.
The three of them started rushing out.
But Peko seemed to be anxious about something, and was scrutinizing Mitsuzane’s facial expression closely.
“…Peko?”
He had been eyeing Mitsuzane with apparent suspicion, but after a while, he spoke, as if he’d internally decided on something.

“Micchy…um…thank you.”
Hearing Peko say the best words he could manage, Mitsuzane smiled happily back at him.

Part 2

One could still see traces of the disaster in Zawame through the abandoned burial mounds and debris around the city.
Reconstruction had been progressing quickly, but the unfortunate reality was that there was still a long way to go.
The ruins were hotspots for unrest, and street gangsters were starting to gather there and cause trouble in the city as of late.
At first, the gangs had merely been large delinquent groups, but after a while, they began rapidly increasing in organization and ferociousness, and eventually escalated into dangerous groups much like organized crime syndicates. Neo Baron had been one of those, and had spread to the point where it was undoubtedly a huge influential factor among such street gangs.
Recently, the violence had been getting even more intense, to the point of spreading beyond their usual areas of red-light and abandoned districts, and causing damage to open areas in general public.
One such abandoned area was a back-alley area known to some as Blackhawk Street.

In the past, it had been a bar town where people had gathered in droves, attracted to its shady atmosphere.
But when the city was flooded with Invase, most of the stores there had burned down in a mysterious fire, and were not reconstructed but completely abandoned.
People without homes and people who wished to avoid society began occupying the remaining houses that had survived the fire, and as the area deteriorated in stability, it became unsafe enough that it was now completely inaccessible to the general public.
Around the end of Blackhawk Street was an abandoned pool bar, from which light was leaking and crude laughter was echoing.
At the entrance was a broken neon sign reading “Sweet Water”.
Inside the shop, which had been remodeled out of an old brick warehouse, was a group of street gangsters, who had made the place into their home base, and were hanging around idly and drinking there.
They were outlaws who had named themselves “Night Warlocks”.
Currently, among the street gangs that were causing mayhem in Zawame, they were a group that could easily claim themselves to be at the first or second rank.
The many gangs competed against each other for dominance, and although they could be said to be reminiscent of the old Beat Riders, their goals were in the complete opposite direction.
At the back of the bar was a luxuriously built sofa. A man wearing sunglasses was sitting on it, with a woman sitting close to him and pouring alcohol into his cup.
He was the leader of the Night Warlocks, and was referred to as “King” by his fellow gang members.
Next to King was a man with a burly-looking physique, who was staring at their surroundings.
“You there, come a little closer!”

“O-Okay…”
A young gang member stepped forward in front of King.
It was a newcomer who had just joined the Night Warlocks. As King, who was leagues above him, beckoned him forward, he was obviously shaking with nervousness.
“What’s your name?”
“K-Kenji.”
“Kenji, huh? You’re the one who was workin’ real hard in our little brawl with Inferno, right?”
Inferno was another street gang much like the Night Warlocks, and they often got in skirmishes with them.
That same day, they’d gotten into yet another brawl over something trivial, but Kenji’s wits had gotten them out of it.
“Nice job. You’ve got some real guts there.”
“N-No, I was just…”
“You’re sellin’ yourself short. For us Night Warlocks, might makes right. Strength is something to be proud of. Don’t you wanna be stronger?”
“Yes, I do!”
“Good answer. Bring it here, Queen.”
The woman sitting next to Queen pulled up a suitcase that had been under her feet, put it on her lap, and opened it.
Inside the case were multiple devices shaped like locks, buried in urethane cushioning and lined up in a row. They were Pomegranate Lockseeds.
“I’m acknowledging you as a warrior, so I’ll give you this.”
King took a Lockseed out of the case and casually tossed it to Kenji.
“You got one of these, and it’ll make you into an unbeatable gangster. Keep it on you at all times. Got it?”
“Thank you very much!”
Deeply moved by King’s actions, Kenji bowed his head multiple times, and finally departed from his sight.

King looked back at the suitcase.
There were only two Lockseeds remaining in it.
“We should restock soon, huh.”
King was in a good mood.
Ever since he’d gotten the gang members to carry Lockseeds on them, everything had been going perfectly for them.
All they had to do was keep them on their person, and it would eliminate their fear and make them feel invincible against all odds. And it did, in fact, make them stronger and faster than usual.
Thanks to the Lockseeds, the Night Warlocks were the strongest gang in the city.
Nowadays, the fun was starting to get ruined by other groups starting to get their hands on them within the market, but they were still leagues far above the rest.
We just gotta keep this up, and I’ll really be king of this town.
King tilted his glass in satisfaction.
“Hm…?”
There was a noisy ruckus going on at the front of the store. Had some of the members gotten drunk and started a fight, or — ?
“Hey, stop right there, you — !!”
A strange pair was rushing towards the back of the store and approaching where King was, breaking past the gang members trying to hold them back.
King was nervous for a moment, wondering if they were under attack by another gang — but when he actually saw the two up close, he was almost disappointed.
A guy in a coat, and a kid who looked like some kind of rich heir…very obviously not gangsters, no matter how you looked at them.
The man in the coat took notice of King’s suitcase and turned to the young man next to him.
“Looks like we hit the bullseye, Micchy.”

“So there really were a ton of Lockseeds out there. With a group this big, of course they’d get involved.”
Despite being surrounded by ferocious gangsters, the two of them — Mitsuzane and Zack — did not budge an inch.
Instead, they stared straight at King with sharp gazes.
“Are you the Night Warlocks’ leader?”
“And what if I am, little boy?”
“Hand over your Lockseeds.”
King was surprised to hear the word “Lockseed” from Mitsuzane, but tried not to show it on his face.
“The hell is that? No idea what you’re on about.”
The suitcase was right there in plain view next to him, but King stood there with complete confidence.
He had an unpleasant smile, and it was obvious he was mocking them.
“That’s not something people like you should be having. If you don’t want to get hurt, be good and hand it over.”
“What’d you just say? You say you’re gonna hurt me? Gyahaha!”
Zack’s words were so inconceivable to him that he burst into laughter.
He was the Night Warlocks’ big boss, the one who struck fear into all others, and here they were saying “if you don’t want to get hurt” to him? What a joke.
“Hey, guys, let’s slaughter ’em!”
It took only one sentence from King to get the other gangsters to converge on them, ready to kill.
“Ready, Micchy?”
“Yeah. It’s not like we’ve got a choice.”
The gang members started rushing Mitsuzane and Zack. But one moment later, King’s grin was wiped right off of his face.
His subordinates had been completely trounced one after another, despite being up against only two people.
It was only natural. Said two people had experienced the literal embodiment

of powerful enemies, and gone through huge numbers of deadly fights before.
Tons of Invase, Overlords, and more…and even battles to the death with other Armored Riders.
Those battles were still memories inscribed in the cores of their bodies, not to mention the deep wounds and regrets.
Such things were on a completely different level from a mere handful of rampaging gangsters. They were long prepared for much greater things.
Even if they were greatly outnumbered, they were completely unmatched.
“All right, hand over the Lockseeds.”
“Gh…Jack!”
The man who had been standing next to King, who had been serving as his guard, came forward in front of Mitsuzane and Zack.
“Get lost, or we’ll really hurt you.”
As if trying to provoke Zack, Jack stuck his fist forward. He was clutching a Pomegranate Lockseed.
“Bleh, seriously? Even *he’s* got a Lockseed?”
“Zack, be careful. They…”
“I know, they might self-destruct.”
We have to take away their Lockseeds before it comes to that, thought Mitsuzane.
Takatora had already contacted Mitsuzane from abroad and informed him about the dangers regarding the Pomegranate Lockseeds.
But the Black Bodhi cultists had been brainwashed and turned into mindless puppets. The gangsters here had no sign of being anything resembling that.
“Graaaaah!!”
Jack screamed like an animal and lunged at Mitsuzane.
Unlike the gangsters they’d just fought, his speed was at a completely inhuman level.
“Damn it!”
Mitsuzane rolled away from Jack’s tackle and dodged it by a hair’s breadth.

Jack's momentum prevented him from stopping, and he plunged right into a counter with bottles lined up on it.
"You okay, Micchy?"
"Yeah, I'm fine. But..."
Jack's tackle had torn the thick wooden counter in two, and the liquor bottles on it were crushed into glass and scattered everywhere.
Jack stood up from the counter wreckage. He was bleeding all over his body, and his arm was bent in a location that was definitely not a joint.
"You gotta be kidding me..."
"It's probably the Lockseed's trance state."
The Lockseed eliminated any sensations of fear and pain, meaning the user could exert power beyond the usual limits of their body. Even if their fist or arm were broken, they could use all the energy they had.
Even a street gang could create an invincible soldier. They had every reason to use such a convenient option. But the price for such power would inevitably lead to ruin.
They absolutely could not allow such dangerous Lockseeds to spread unchecked. Both of them hardened their resolve.
"Rrrraaaaagh!"
As Jack lunged on them again, both of them dodged.
As they passed each other, Zack threw a punch at him, but Jack completely shrugged it off.
"Yooooooooou...!!"
Jack used incredible force to tear off a brass railing that had been attached to the wall, and swung it down on Zack with fierce momentum.
Zack waited until the last minute and barely dodged the blow — using the split second to sneak around right behind Jack. He then pulled his arm right around Jack's neck and tightened it close.
"Gh...!?"
Even though he couldn't feel pain, he could no longer retain consciousness

once the flow of blood to his brain stopped.
Jack's eyes went completely white in only a few seconds, and he collapsed onto the ground.
"Micchy! The Lockseeds!"
After picking up the Lockseed that Jack had dropped, both of them got up to approach King again.
But King and Queen were no longer in the shop. They seemed to have escaped during their brawl with Jack.
"Dammit, they got away!"
"Let's drop it here."
Zack was about to run out of the shop in pursuit, but Mitsuzane had called out to him.
"We don't know the area well, and the layout around here is tricky, so I doubt we can catch up with them anyway."
"Gh…And I thought we finally had a lead on them."
"Well, anyway, let's head back to the garage. Once we're there, we can talk about our next move."
As Mitsuzane said this, he stared into the dull luster of the Pomegranate Lockseed.

Part 3

The garage served as Team Gaim's home base.
Once all of the team conflicts had come to an end, other teams had started visiting regularly.
While it was less common these days for the entire team to get together, it was still an important place filled with memories for them.
But in the last few weeks, Team Gaim members like Chucky, Rica, and Rat, and even other Beat Riders like Zack, had been visiting more frequently.
Naturally, it wasn't because they were getting together to dance, nor for mere nostalgia for the old days.
Now that Zawame was drenched in turbulence yet again, they'd gathered to discuss how to clear the air over it.
"Micchy, Zack! Welcome back! You look tired…How'd it go?"
Seeing Mitsuzane and Zack returning to the garage, Chucky called out to them in a cheery voice.
The clock had already reached around midnight, but Chucky, Rat, and Team Baron member Peko were still in the garage.

Mitsuzane and Zack quietly shook their heads in response to Chucky and sat down on a floor bench.
“I was really hoping to get a hold of the Night Warlocks’ boss this time, but…” Zack sighed.
The Pomegranate Lockseeds were spreading in droves among the local street gangsters, and Black Bodhi was behind all of them.
Takatora had analyzed the data he’d retrieved, and discovered that the Lockseeds had been manufactured and distributed all over the world. Most pertinently, Zawame was receiving particularly large amounts of them.
Mitsuzane had received this information from Takatora, and since Takatora was still carrying on the fight abroad, Mitsuzane was working in Zawame on his behalf.
And so, Mitsuzane and the other Beat Riders were still trying to locate the Black Bodhi hideout in Zawame…but after a few weeks, they hadn’t managed to uncover a single clue.
“What about you guys?” asked Mitsuzane.
Chucky scratched her head.
“I tried tracking down some Inferno members, but I just ended up going in circles downtown…”
“I didn’t get anything interesting either…”
Rat and Rica shook their heads.
“…Nothing at all, then,” muttered Zack.
Peko turned to face him.
“Hey, are you sure there’s a Black Bodhi hideout in Zawame?”
“There’s no way they could go through all those Lockseeds unless they had some kind of major base here. If the data my brother sent me is accurate, there should be a hideout somewhere…” Mitsuzane was the one who responded, but it seemed like he was still collecting his thoughts as he spoke.
“So does that mean the Saver System is somewhere here? In this city?” said

Rat.
“Probably,” said Mitsuzane, nodding in response.
The Saver System — a weapon of mass destruction, and a copy of the Scalar System once created by Yggdrasill as part of its Project Ark.
“Remember what happened with Shura? It’s hard to believe they’re not making these somewhere in Zawame,” said Zack, thinking back on their fight against Neo Baron.
Shura — the leader of Neo Baron, a man who had been hosting illegal underground martial arts events. Shura had been attempting to use the Saver System to rid Zawame City of people he deemed to be worthless.
“But Micchy, Black Bodhi’s trying to make the Saver System, right? Why would they hand Lockseeds out to gangs?”
“The Pomegranate Lockseed can brainwash anyone who holds them and control them against their will. None of the gangsters realize this. If anything, they just think it’s something that makes them stronger. So in other words, Black Bodhi gets an easy way to raise a huge army…and if push comes to shove, they can make them all self-destruct.”
Rat still didn’t seem to be convinced by Mitsuzane’s explanation.
“That part I get, but…what does Black Bodhi even want to get out of all of this? What’s the point of killing people here in Zawame?”
“I don’t know either. But they’re a cult, so maybe there doesn’t even need to be a logical reason.”
But even as he made his case, Mitsuzane himself was thinking: *but is that really it?*
Mitsuzane had gone through Yggdrasill’s documents and learned that Black Bodhi’s leader, Kugai Kudou, was an extremely talented researcher. Unfortunately for him, he’d happened to be working alongside a certain genius, Ryouma Sengoku.
And then, an unusual turn of events — although Kugai should have died in the initial Lockseed experiment, he’d come back to life, and formed Black

Bodhi. Takatora had said there must be another leader this time — Mitsuzane had also agreed.
But there was one particularly concerning thing among Yggdrasill's documents, within Ryouma Sengoku's reports.
Normally, when writing his reports, Ryouma was the kind of person who left no room for ambiguity and described everything in detail.
But for some reason, whenever it came to Kugai and Black Bodhi, his descriptions suddenly became unnervingly vague.
"Well, I guess..."
Realizing this question-and-answer session was getting them nowhere, Mitsuzane quickly tried to divert the conversation.
"Either way, if we keep letting Black Bodhi get away with this, Zawame will be in even more trouble. And something is definitely going to happen sooner or later..."
All of the other members of the group could only respond with silence.
Another huge disaster was about to take place in Zawame. How much time did they have left to stop it?
"Man, Micchy, if only your brother were here too..."
"My brother's already got his hands full in other countries. We've got to hold down the fort here ourselves."
"Damn it...!"
Zack's face was full of anguish as he stormed out of the garage.
"Hey, what?...Did I say something wrong?"
"Give me a moment, I'll go check on him."
Peko looked on in confusion as Mitsuzane headed out to chase after Zack.
Shortly after, he found Zack in a nearby park, standing there, alone.
As Mitsuzane approached, Zack started mumbling in a weak voice.
"...I'm so pathetic."
"I could say that about myself."
Mitsuzane could only nod in response to what Zack had said. His thoughts

were painfully clear to him.
“Kaito and Kouta left this city in our hands, but it’s turned into this, and I can’t just sit here and watch and do nothing…”
“But you’re not. You’re still putting up a proper fight.”
“…Micchy?”
“…I’ve done some awful things to all of you guys. I can try to make up for it all I want, but no matter what I do, I’ll never be able to. But that’s also why I can’t give up, no matter what happens.”
Mitsuzane’s words weren’t for Zack as much as he was reciting his own words to himself, but his words still managed to get through to Zack despite that.
“Yeah, you’re right. I don’t think I’m strong enough to really replace them, but…I gotta do what I can. Sorry, I made myself look really stupid there.”
The two of them were finally able to smile again.
Standing side by side, they headed back towards the garage — but a sudden feeling of discomfort washed over them, coming from the darkness ahead.
The two of them stopped in their tracks.
Within that darkness was a man, standing there in silence, as if he had been waiting for Mitsuzane and Zack to approach.
“…!”
A thin man in a dark suit. There was something disturbing about the strange aura around him.
“I will not allow you to get in the way of my ideals, Mitsuzane Kureshima.”
The man’s voice was low in volume, but there was a sense of coldness in it, as if echoing from the depths of the earth.
“…Who are you?”
Mitsuzane lashed out in a harsh tone, but he knew this man’s face very well. It was a face he’d seen in Yggdrasill’s documents. But he also knew this shouldn’t be possible. This man should have been…
“My name is Kugai Kudou.”

“You’re supposed to be dead!”
“You are correct. I am already dead.”
“What kind of joke is that?!”
Zack headed towards the man, attempting to punch him, but his fist went straight through empty air.
The man, who had been there a split second earlier, had vanished.
“He’s gone…!?”
Confused at what was going on, Zack looked back at Mitsuzane.
Mitsuzane still couldn’t believe his eyes.
“Kouta Kazuraba could not save this world.”
Hearing the voice suddenly cut back in from behind him, Mitsuzane turned around.
The man was now close enough to touch him.
“When did you — !?”
Mitsuzane quickly jumped aside. His intuition as a fighter, which had saved him from near-death experiences multiple times, was setting off alarm bells in his head.
Preparing for what might come next, Mitsuzane pulled out his Sengoku Driver.
“…You know about Kouta?”
“Kouta Kazuraba took the Golden Fruit, abandoned humanity, and left this world behind.”
“The hell are you saying?!”
Zack tried to land another hit on the man, but the man was no longer there.
He had disappeared yet again, as if he had melted into the darkness.
Within that darkness, they could only hear the man’s voice echoing through it.
“Come and accept my salvation. Now that Helheim is gone, I am the only one left who can save humanity.”
No matter how many times Mitsuzane and Zack looked left and right, there

was no one there.
It was as if nobody had been there to begin with.
“Micchy, what the hell just happened…!?”
“I have no idea…”
That answer was as much as Mitsuzane could muster.

Part 4

As the days passed, the local gangs were getting increasingly powerful and vicious.
Even worse, once they realized Mitsuzane and the others were after them, they started relocating their hideouts at a faster rate and keeping their higher-ups hidden, making it even harder to get a hold of them.
And even when they did manage to capture a gang member, most of them were simple grunts who knew nothing about what went on behind the scenes, so they were still completely left in the dark about where the Black Bodhi hideout was or who their Lockseed distributor was.
Back in Team Gaim's garage, Zack stood in front of a map of Zawame hanging from the wall, where all of the areas they had investigated were filled in with highlighter.
Most of the map was already covered in bright colors.
"Another day of nothing…seriously, where the hell is that hideout?"
"Well, as important as the hideout is…oh, here, I have some leftovers, so come and have them if you like."

Having just entered the garage, Hideyasu Jounouchi — a Beat Rider who had helped them in the fight against Helheim — had joined the conversation. Jounouchi placed a box on the table. In it was a bunch of cakes in different colors.

"Whoa, Jounouchi, you're so thoughtful!"

Chucky, Rica, and the other girls who liked sweet things all crowded around the cakes.

"I've got my hands full with the store now that Oren's not here, so I can't do much to help. Please take this as my apology."

After the Neo Baron incident, Oren was rarely at the store. After returning from South Asia, he was helping Takatora by tracking Black Bodhi down from different directions.

Meanwhile, Jounouchi was handling his pastry shop, "Charmant", in Oren's place. One could say that Jounouchi had earned Oren's trust so well that he was now allowed to run such an important shop for him.

"Moving back to the subject. The hideout's certainly important, but you still need to figure out where the gangsters are getting their Lockseeds, right? If you can get at least that part, you can figure out where the hideout is from there."

"It's not like we don't know anything at all. We managed to prod into one of the gangs' higher-ups and got a bit of info."

Looking at the cakes lined up in the box, Zack picked up a banana chiffon cake that didn't seem to be too overwhelmingly sweet and took a bite.

"They arrange a specific time and place, and only one person is allowed to go retrieve them. The distributor also comes alone, and leaves the Lockseeds with them."

"Only one person…so would that be a Black Bodhi cultist? Or a specialized seller like Sid?"

"Seems like even *they* don't know who it is," said Mitsuzane, chiming in to assist. "They tried tracking the person down to figure out who they were, but

they suddenly just disappeared…or at least, that's what they said."
"Disappeared? What, are they saying it's a ghost or something?"
"A ghost…yeah, something like that. But…"
"Didn't Micchy and Zack run into a guy in the park? They also said he disappeared," said Chucky, chiming in while still enjoying her cake.
"Yeah. We saw a man in the park. He called himself Kugai Kudou, and he just up and vanished right in front of us…"
"Kudou…you mean the leader of Black Bodhi, right? So we really *are* dealing with a ghost…?"
"Of course not. There's gotta be some kind of trick going on."
Peko was snorting with laughter, but Mitsuzane and Zack didn't have it in them to laugh.
That night, they'd felt the cold shiver going down their spines, and they could still clearly remember the indescribable, eerie feeling they'd gotten from the man who had melted into the dark, like a phantom.
The Beat Riders had fought Overlords, and Megahex, and all sorts of overwhelmingly powerful foes, but what if they really were up against Kugai Kudou, a man who was already dead?
How were they supposed to fight an enemy they couldn't even touch?

The same day, midnight.
At an old commercial building within the main city.
The building was already old enough that it was set to be demolished soon, so most of the building's tenants had already moved out, and everyone left was too uncomfortable to be around there at night.
But on this night, there was a single person standing on the roof.
It was King, the big boss of the Night Warlocks, standing there on the rooftop with a trash pile of rooftop billboards and air conditioner outdoor unit pipes.
He had been waiting on the roof for twenty minutes.
"Damn, how long is he gonna keep me waiting…?!"

King looked down to light his cigarette, and when he looked up again, he jolted back in surprise to see a man in a suit standing there, on the same rooftop where he should have been alone.
“T-There you are! When’d you get here…!?”
A thin man in a dark suit.
He didn’t seem to be aggressive, but there was something distant about him.
There was no doubt about it; it was Kugai Kudou.
Kugai faced King and gestured with a nod.
Looking in the direction Kugai was indicating, King saw a silver case lurking under the stairs leading up to the decaying penthouse.
He ran up to the case and opened it to find ten Pomegranate Lockseeds buried in cushioning material.
King nodded in satisfaction and turned back to face Kugai.
“How much for these?”
“I have no need for money.”
They had already gone through several transactions — no, several one-sided deliveries — like this. This question and answer had come up every single time.
“You’re giving these to us for free? Again? What the hell are you even trying to do?”
“I have only one purpose. I must save humanity.”
“Save humanity? Well, whatever. Hahaha!”
King burst into laughter at the unusual answer.
But Kugai was staring back at him coldly.
“No, no, I’m laughing too much…”
Kugai quietly started heading back towards the emergency stairs going down.
“Hey, wait a sec. When can we come get more Lockseeds?”
“I will contact you again.”
Every time they received a delivery from Kugai, it was always completely

one-sided.
And whenever they needed to restock, somehow, he always got in contact with them at the exact right moment, as if he already knew.
King approached the emergency stairs and looked down, but Kugai was nowhere to be seen.
“Man, that guy creeps me out…but who cares what he says, he’s giving me these, and that’s all I need.”
King opened the case again and looked back at the Lockseeds.
“With this many, we can finally do something real big…”
King stood up and looked over the view of Zawame at night, spreading far beyond the rusted railing on the roof.
Zawame was spread out before his eyes, like a toy made just for him.

Part 5

It was payday for most companies, so Zawame Central Bank was crowded with people.
A security guard smiled at a woman pushing a stroller with a baby.
But that smile completely froze as soon as he saw a few men rushing into the bank.
The men were all wearing the sort of animal head-shaped rubber masks that would normally be worn at parties, and were holding pistols.
One of them began yelling into the bank.
“Everyone here freezes where they are, right now! You over there, close the window shutter!!”
All of the bankers and customers hadn’t processed what was going on, and were staring at the men with their jaws dropped.
But once one of the men had fired his pistol at the ceiling, the loud noise echoing through the bank snapped them all out of it. Now that everyone there realized they were in the midst of a bank robbery, everything went into an uproar.

“I told y’all to shut up!! Or else…”
Hoping to silence the women there screaming in panic, the robber fired his pistol at the elderly security guard standing near the entrance.
“Gyah!!”
The guard’s thigh was pierced by the bullet, and he fell to the floor.
“Idiots who don’t do what we say get shot to bits!”
The bank suddenly fell completely silent.
The bank clerk scrambled to hit the switch for the window shutter.
The shutter fell down with a loud clang, and the bank was now isolated from the outside door.
“The clerks kneel on the floor with both arms up! The customers go face-down on the floor!”
One of the robbers climbed over the counter, standing right in front of an elderly bank clerk.
“You the one in charge? Open the safes and hand over the cash! Hey, lady over there! Take it and fill up this case!”
Despite how unusual it was for a bank to have their shutters down during business hours, everyone outside only tilted their heads in confusion, and nobody called the police.
Nobody even entertained the idea that a bank in such a prominent place would be robbed in broad daylight.
But during all of this, a group outside had been observing the entire affair, from the point the men had broken into the bank to the moment the shutters had been brought down.
Beat Riders Rica and Rat had been tracking them, hoping to figure out what the Night Warlocks were up to.
“That escalated real bad…”
Rat pulled out his phone and called Mitsuzane, who was waiting back in the garage.
“Got it. Keep an eye on it until we get there. But if things start looking really

dangerous, don't push it too far and get out of there as soon as you can, okay?"
After hanging up, Mitsuzane explained the situation to Zack and Peko, who were also waiting in the garage with him.
"A bank robbery...what should we do?"
"Well, of course, the first thing to do is call the police. Our biggest priority is making sure all the civilians in the bank are safe. But if it looks like they're getting away from the police, we'll keep a tail on them and find out where the Night Warlocks moved their hideout."
The three of them piled into a car, and Peko stepped on the gas to get them to the bank.

"Woohoo!"
As the men drove out in their minivan, the Night Warlocks member Kenji took off his rubber mask, cheering and tapping the suitcases piled up in the back seat.
"That was way too easy, wasn't it, Ace?"
"Yeah, I seriously didn't expect it'd go this well."
On top of Jack and long-time member Ace, there were four other Night Warlock members, including Kenji. All of them were in a good mood, with the bank robbery having gone far more smoothly than they'd anticipated. They'd packed enough cash from the bank safes to fill five large suitcases, loaded them into the minivan that they'd parked outside, and managed to escape before the police cars arrived.
"King was right, we're gonna get even bigger at this rate."
"Well, this is just the first step."
— Who says we're gonna stop at taking over the town?
We're gonna get even bigger, big enough to control the entire country from the shadows.
In order to do that, we need money —

Right before their attack on the bank, King, the Night Warlocks' boss, had sent them out with those words.
"Seriously, King is so cool. We're the Night Warlocks, and we're the greatest!"
The gangsters were so caught up in the success of their bank robbery that they took no notice of the passenger car on their tail.

"Hey, Peko, shouldn't we stay a little further back?"
"It's okay, there's tons of cars here, they won't notice us."
Mitsuzane's group had met up with Rica and Rat, and at first, they had kept an eye on the bank while waiting to see if the police would arrive.
But the gangsters had taken their leave before any sign of a police car arrived, so they had left the bank to follow them instead.
The gangsters' minivan headed away from the city center and towards the suburbs.
"Damn it, the road's clearing up," muttered Peko, clutching the steering wheel.
The further they were from the city center, the more the traffic cleared up, and they were likely to get caught at this rate.
"Give me a minute..."
Mitsuzane used the car navigation system to check the map of the nearby area.
"They're trying to avoid wide roads, so let's take the national highway and intercept them here."
"Got it!"
Mitsuzane was banking on the idea that, based on the surrounding traffic conditions, the gang was unlikely to make a major change of course.
The car stopped following behind the minivan, turned right at the next intersection, and passed by a large factory as it headed towards the national highway.
The road was still open, and it seemed like they were closing in on them, but

—

“Gaaaah!?”

Peko had slammed his foot on the brake. Zack yelped in shock.

“Hey, what the hell was that!?”

“Look! Can’t you see there’s someone there?!”

“Huh?”

Zack leaned forward and looked through the front window.

He hadn’t noticed him earlier, but there was a man standing there, only a few meters from the car, and he was staring right back at them.

Zack recognized his face.

“Micchy, we know this guy…”

“Yeah, that’s definitely him.”

Mitsuzane and Zack got out of the car and faced the man directly.

It was most certainly the same man from the park, the one who had called himself Kugai Kudou.

As the man gazed back at him in silence, Mitsuzane spoke up.

“You’re involved with Black Bodhi, right?”

“I believe I already gave you my name.”

“Kugai Kudou is dead. So who are you? Why do you have his face?”

“You seem to be more dimwitted than I expected, Mitsuzane Kureshima.”

A Sengoku Driver had suddenly appeared around the man’s waist as he stared coldly back at Mitsuzane.

In his hand was a Pomegranate Lockseed, and another mysterious lock that shone with an unusual color of blood.

Pomegranate! Blood Orange!

Blood Pomegranate Arms! The twisted bloom of sacrifice![1]

Blood Orange Arms! The heretical advent on stage![2]

A Crack opened above him, and a blood-red colored Armored Rider appeared from a flash of light.

One who reflected back the sinister fate of those who gazed upon him, the

savior of freshly shed blood, Armored Rider Saver...!
“He’s an Armored Rider!?”
“...Just like the Armored Rider my brother told me about.”
Mitsuzane’s older brother, Takatora Kureshima, had once fought alongside Ryouma Sengoku against Kugai Kudou, who had transformed into an Armored Rider.
Could this man truly be Kugai Kudou?
“Well, it doesn’t really matter who this guy is! Let’s go, Micchy!”
“Yeah, you’re right. Whoever it is, as long as he’s causing trouble, we’re here to fight!”
Mitsuzane and Zack simultaneously put on their Sengoku Drivers and held up their Lockseeds.
“Transform!”
In response, two Cracks opened above their heads, and steel fruits came down from above.
Grape Arms!
Walnut Arms!
Two warriors emerged from the flash of light.
One who stood there with atonement and resolve dwelling in his heart, the young dragon who surpassed even the greatest in fighting arts: Armored Rider Ryugen.
One burning with passion and fighting spirit, the gladiator burning with the flames of courage: Armored Rider Knuckle.
Seeing the two in front of him and side by side, Saver spoke.
“As long as you still utilize the system created by Ryouma Sengoku, you are obstacles to me. If you reject my salvation, I must eliminate you.”
“Cut the crap! Come on, Micchy, let’s get him!”
Yelling angrily, Knuckle quickly jumped closer to Saver and aimed a punch at him.
Whoosh!

Saver deftly avoided Knuckle's fist as he roared, dodging it by a hair's breadth.
"Whoa!"
With his attempt at a huge attack completely dodged, Knuckle quickly switched to jabs with smaller ranges of motion, rolling them out left, right, left in quick succession — but Saver anticipated every single one of them.
"Gh!"
As Knuckle found Saver constantly slipping out of his reach and evading all of his attacks, he prepared for Saver to launch a counterattack. But Ryugen had aimed his Grape Dragun at him, and fired.
Saver managed to kick up from the ground in time, and jumped right over the incoming shots.
But Knuckle had managed to use the interval of time to get away safely.
"Thanks!"
"He's really too strong…he dodged every single one of them."
"Yeah…he's really pissing me off."
Saver showed no sign of being provoked, and stood there calmly without even attempting a counterattack.
"Is that truly the extent of your power?"
"We'll have to try this…"
Ryugen quickly glanced at Knuckle.
Knuckle immediately understood what Ryugen was thinking.
"We just gotta shoot until we land a hit!"
Ryugen started firing the Grape Dragun in quick succession.
The shots barraged Saver like a whirlwind.
But Saver continued dodging all of the shots, as if he could predict exactly where they would land.
"I have been watching your battles for all of this time. I already know how you fight."
"You sure about that?"

“…?…!?”
As if realizing what Knuckle was getting at, Saver turned to look back at him.
While Ryugen had been distracting Saver, Knuckle had attached a Genesis Core to his Sengoku Driver.
It was the one recovered from Kaito Kumon’s Genesis Driver.
It should have been destroyed thanks to Ryouma Sengoku’s self-destruct program — the Kill Process — and even Zack had no idea why it was still usable.
But Kouta Kazuraba, who had awoken as an Overlord, had once used his powers to restore a broken Victorious Lockseed.
So in that case, perhaps Kaito, who had obtained power comparable to that of Kouta, could have restored a Genesis Core.
— To entrust his wishes to those who would follow in his footsteps.
Either way, Zack didn’t quite understand, and the only thing he could do was fight back with all of the strength he had.
Zack pulled out a Chestnut Lockseed and attached it to the Genesis Core.
Chestnut Energy!
Light burst out, and the electronic sound of the Lockseed reverberated through the air.
Jinba Chestnut! Ha-hah!
Knuckle was now wearing armor summoned by the Chestnut Energy Lockseed.
Armored Rider Knuckle, Jinba Chestnut Arms.
Running like a warrior heading onto the battlefield, he slammed his spiked fists into Saver.
“Hyaaaaaaaaah!”
The energy gathered in Knuckle’s fist coalesced into a huge impact that pierced through Saver and exploded.
Saver was completely swallowed up in the explosion.
“Did we get him!?”

” — I see. You simply managed to survive the battle against Helheim, and nothing more.”
“Huh!?”
Only a moment later, Saver was now standing right behind Knuckle.
Even Ryugen, who should have been able to see the entire thing from a distance, was unable to follow Saver’s movements.
He seemed to have completely disappeared and reappeared in a split second.
“No way, I swear that should have done something!?”
“You truly are the greatest obstacles to my salvation, I see.”
“You…!”
Ryugen shot his Grape Dragun at Saver.
But Saver vanished, like a phantom.
“Huh!?”
Looking around, there was no longer any sign of the red Armored Rider.
“What the hell…”
The two of them released their transformations and got up in a daze, utterly confused as to what was going on.
Peko rushed in to meet them.
“Peko! You saw that, right!? He just disappeared…”
“Y-Yeah, I saw it…But now…”
“Oh, dammit!”
It was immediately apparent what Peko was getting at.
They had been dragged out of the way by Saver and kept aside for a long while.
In all of the rush, they had completely lost track of the gangsters’ minivan.

Part 6

“Seriously, great job, guys.”
Five large suitcases were stacked in front of King.
Looking at the suitcases that were overflowing with bankrolls, King drank from the glass of Western liquor in his hand, in high spirits.
They were in a group of warehouses in the suburbs of Zawame.
The Night Warlocks had relocated their hideout to the basement of an abandoned warehouse.
Their raid on the bank had been successful, and the gang members under Ace’s lead had returned to the hideout without a single scratch.
They had been concerned about potentially being tailed on their way back, but even that seemed to have no problems.
This was only one step in King’s overall plan, but things had gone so well up to this point that it was hard to feel worried.
It was as if God had blessed his ambitions — at least, such was how King saw it.
However, he was not completely satisfied.

King had two goals in conducting the raid on the bank.
The first was to collect money for the future.
The second was to test how strong the gang members were with the Lockseeds.
If the Night Warlocks were to expand as an organization, it was only natural that they would eventually get into conflict with police officers and other gangs.
Once that happened, how well could their members with Lockseeds handle themselves in a fight?...King had wanted to put that to the test.
While it would have been an unfortunate loss if any of their members had been shot down by police officers, the four gang members besides Ace had been picked for the job because they had no fear of death.
“Well, I can’t complain, I should enjoy this. I’ll just have to test them again later...”
Muttering under his breath so that his subordinates wouldn’t hear, he brought the glass to his lips again, but there was no amber-colored liquid there, and he had already drained it completely.
“Hey, I’m out of booze.”
He prodded the woman sitting next to him, nudging her to bring him more, but received no response.
“Hey, you heard me!”
Queen, completely ignoring what King was saying, was entranced by the Pomegranate Lockseed in her hands.
“Ah...as long as I have this...I can be happy...”
Queen was whispering her words, addressing them to no one in particular.
“Gh, do the Lockseeds have side effects or something?”
The Pomegranate Lockseeds erased people’s ability to feel fear, made them feel powerful, and even eliminated their pain.
The holder would bypass their unconscious limitations and exert extraordinary levels of force, but the burden would accumulate in their body

and brain. Eventually, they would wear themselves out physically and mentally, and become completely unable to function — King knew this, and thus avoided carrying one at all costs.

“What the hell is that guy trying to pull on me?”

King momentarily recalled the memory of “that man” in his mind.

“He’s totally trying to use me, and I can’t have that. I’ll have to yank him out of the sheep’s clothing sometime…”

Seeing that Queen was still entranced by the Lockseed in her hands, King called out to the gangsters in the basement.

“Hey, someone, bring me some liquor!”

Normally, everyone there would rush in all at once in the hopes of buttering up their boss, but…something was different on this night.

The basement was lightly illuminated by the construction lamps hanging from the ceiling, and the gangsters there were split into small groups, drinking and gambling, but for some reason, despite their boss calling them, not a single one responded to King —

“Why the hell is nobody answering!?”

Now yelling and in a bad mood, King approached Kenji, the one sitting closest to him. He grabbed his chest violently and dragged him upwards.

“Y’all making fun of me?”

But Kenji’s eyes were as hollow as Queen’s, and his Lockseed was in his hand.

“…!”

King started looking around frantically.

Looking at them more closely, he realized all of the members in the basement were holding their Lockseeds to their chests and staring at the faint glow coming off from them.

“What the hell…”

Is this what happens when we overuse the Lockseeds? thought King, but there was something strange about everyone becoming like this at the exact same

time.
“Kenji! Throw it away!”
“That…I cannot do…”
“Seriously, just do what I say and throw it out!”
King started dragging Kenji into a scuffle, but Ace walked up and pulled King off of him.
“Ace! You trying to turn on me, too?”
“King…Pick up the Lockseed…”
“…The fruit of miracles…shall lead us to salvation…”
The air around his subordinates was feeling more and more dangerous by the second, and King pulled out the pistol he kept in his belt, pointing the muzzle at Ace.
As if on cue, the gangsters in the room all stood up together and surrounded King.
“Don’t come any closer!”
King shot his pistol at Ace’s shoulder, but Ace’s facial expression remained frozen.
“Why…must you reject salvation…?”
“Shut up!!”
He fired again and again.
One person collapsed after he managed to hit their vitals, but the others continued to approach King without any hesitation.
“Indeed…You…were not chosen…”
The gun started clicking to signify there were no more bullets left, and King’s screams echoed through the dim basement.
But his screams were soon buried under the words of prayer leaking from all of the gangsters’ mouths in unison.
“The time of the end…is near…”
“Save us…who are lost…”

The next day —
According to a news report, a body had been found in a warehouse in the suburbs of Zawame. The body was that of the boss of the Night Warlocks, a gang on the police's wanted list, and he had been referred to by the other members as "King".
Stacks of money stolen from Zawame Central Bank had been found in the warehouse basement, completely untouched.
But there were no other gang members found within the basement, and police was continuing to track down their whereabouts —

Chapter 3

Part 1

It was like a palace made of concrete.
A myriad of columns lined up in a dimly-lit, vast space, much like the Greek Parthenon.
It was a strange place that seemed somewhat detached from reality, with over a hundred people gathered there.
They were office workers, housewives, students…many others. And sticking out the most among them were young people who seemed to have been cast out from all other places — in other words, street gangsters.
Many of the former Night Warlocks were there as well.
There were also several members of Inferno, and the other gangs that had been in conflict with the Night Warlocks.
The one thing common to all of the people there was that each one had a Pomegranate Lockseed in hand.
All of them had been staring at their Lockseeds with unfocused eyes, before suddenly raising their heads at once to look at a singular point.
A giant concrete wall towering and looming over the crowd, stretching as far

as the eye could see.
The staircase slithered on the ground before reaching up to the ceiling, and on the landing stood a thin man in a black suit.
Kugai Kudou.
“The time of the end is near…”
“Save us who are lost…”
The people’s collective voices echoed throughout the area made of concrete.
“We are Black Bodhi.”
Kugai spoke his words in a solemn voice.
“The time of the end approaches. As our apostles, you must guide those who are still uncertain. Once the end is reached, our time of salvation shall come.”
Overcome with emotion and ecstasy, the people began to cheer.
As if resonating with them, the Lockseeds in their hand began to glow with a faint red light.

“It’s our new fruit parfait. What do you think?”
The group had gotten together at Drupers, a local fruit parlor.
The owner, Kiyojirou Bandou, had shown up at Mitsuzane’s table, and was addressing Jounouchi, who was indulging himself with the parfait.
“It’s good. The mango sauce goes with it perfectly.”
“I’m so thrilled to hear that from someone from Charmant~”
As Bandou grinned with satisfaction, Mitsuzane turned to address him.
“Are you sure you want to give us all of this for free?”
“It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”
Bandou waved the silver tray in his hand around like a fan.
“We don’t have a lot of customers today, so if you don’t eat it, the fruit will spoil anyway.”
Just as he had said, despite it being the weekend, the store was mostly empty.

At the cash register, Iyo, a part-time worker there, was standing there with her usual face devoid of expression.
"...Is it because of the explosions?" asked Zack.
Bandou shrugged and smiled.
"I was hoping things would improve once the gang wars went away, but...it's getting to be a problem."
Bandou returned to the counter, and Mitsuzane, Jounouchi, Zack, and Rica all looked at each other and sighed.
Once King's corpse had been discovered, somehow, all of the gangs had vanished from the city at once. It hadn't been only the Night Warlocks; even the other gangs, like Inferno, had also dissolved.
Why did they disappear, and where had they gone...?
Nobody had any clue, but the city people were relieved, and for them, as long as the gangsters and threats to public safety were gone, that was enough.
But Mitsuzane and the others knew that Black Bodhi was behind the gangs, and were afraid that it could be an omen of something coming.
And, indeed, only a few days later — their fears had been spot on.
There was an explosion in the heart of Zawame.
At first, it was thought to be an explosion caused by hazardous materials, but witnesses present at the scene testified that it was a human carrying some kind of explosive object, or, in other words, a suicide bomber.
Following that was a whole series of explosions, all caused by suicide bombing. Many civilians had also been injured in the aftermath.
Normally, this would be labeled as suicide bomb terrorism. But the most important part — the statement of intent — had yet to be made.
Who was causing all of this violence, and why?
"It's gotta be the brainwashed gangsters, right?"
"The street gangs disappeared all around the city, but then this happened right after it. It would at least explain why King of the Night Warlocks was killed."

As he spoke, Mitsuzane mulled over what the leader of Black Bodhi — the man who called himself Kugai Kudou — must be planning.
Had he been supplying gangs with Lockseeds in order to increase the number of people caught up in these suicide bombings?
What was the point of all of this suicide bombing in the first place? Perhaps it was a ploy to keep the world distracted until the Saver System was complete — but no matter how much he thought about it, the only thing he could do was make haphazard guesses.
“There’s no point in worrying about it. The bigger question is what we should do now.”
Zack had plucked the words right out of Mitsuzane’s thought process.
It was just as Zack said. Right now, they needed more information about Black Bodhi.
“For now, can’t we try catching the suicide bombers before they explode?” said Jounouchi, with cream stuck on his mouth.
“We won’t know who they are until after they’ve already blown up.”
“Well…we can try and track down some of the missing gang members, right? That would probably help narrow it down.”
“Oh, you’re right. But we don’t have enough people to do a whole search around Zawame…”
“Ah! If that’s the problem…”
Rica, who had been listening in on the conversation from the side, raised her right hand.
“I got a call from a friend yesterday…”
According to Rica, she’d been contacted by members of other dance teams — Raid Wild, Pop Up, Souten, and many others who wanted to help out with the investigation.
“All of these gangsters and explosions are making it really hard to hold dance sessions, so everyone’s really mad about it.”
Mitsuzane had nothing but gratitude for all of the other teams offering their

assistance. He nodded at Rica.
“That’ll be great. Tell them we’d love to have their help.”

Now that the Beat Riders had even more people helping them out, they all immediately got to searching around Zawame.
Their goal was to track down and secure any potential terrorist bombers. But unlike with gangsters, who would cause trouble in groups, it was terribly difficult to find a potential culprit when they were acting alone and blending into a large city.
On top of that, it was hard to predict where an explosion would happen. Normally, this kind of thing would occur in large company buildings or other public facilities…but in this case, such places were rarely made into targets. Explosions were occurring one after another, in places that would be incomprehensible if this were actual planned terrorism, such as private houses, small parks, and back alleys with few people. Fortunately, it meant that there were few victims overall, but…because it was always uncertain when and where one would happen, the civilians were only getting progressively more and more anxious.
— And then, the sudden change happened with little fanfare.
It had initially been advertised as a “good luck charm” that spread through communication apps and social media. The original source was unknown. Anyone who touched a mysterious power item called a “Fruit of Life” could purge their body of toxins and recharge themselves with new life energy.
In practice, most people scoffed and refused to bother with it. Eventually, they forgot that such a concept had even been up for discussion.
But there were always exceptions. And on top of that, Zawame was at the mercy of shocking incidents with suicide bombings. Faith was, after all, an enthralling thing. It was only natural that anxious people would start trying out this “good luck charm”.
It was as simple as touching this “Fruit of Life” through a cloth. The

explanation was that “the fruit’s power is too strong for a human to touch it directly before getting used to it”.
Such a meaningless “good luck charm” eventually became a fad in Zawame. Everyone who tried it out felt a strange, uplifting feeling and a sense that they could do anything. All they had to do was touch this “Fruit of Life” for several seconds. No strange symptoms would come up afterwards.
It made sense. The “Fruit of Life” was nothing like a narcotic drug, and generated no physical dependency.
The “good luck charm” started to spread, little by little. Those who used its magic over and over again eventually gathered together, and they started actively advocating to spread the word of their wonderful experiences.
They eventually adopted the same name as a certain minor religious cult that had once existed in Zawame.
Black Bodhi.

“What the hell are you trying to do?!”
Peko’s angry voice rang out in front of the station. People were staring as they passed by.
Peko grabbed a weak-looking middle-aged man by the chest and started aggressively interrogating him.
“Excuse me…Please calm down. I am simply here to spread the word of Black Bodhi’s teachings…”
“Are you another Lockseed puppet!? Where’s your hideout!?”
“Um…ah, yes. If you’re looking for our church, you can take one of our flyers…”
“Don’t play dumb with me!”
Mitsuzane rushed in to stop Peko, who looked like he was about to punch the man in the face.
“Stop, Peko.”
“Micchy!? But look, this guy here…”

“We’ll be in trouble if the police get involved. Let’s go.”
“H-Hey!”
Mitsuzane apologized to the man for the trouble and started dragging Peko away.
“They don’t understand anything. They’re just ordinary people.”
“But they’re from Black Bodhi…!”
“They’re just a bunch of people who happened to gather around a good luck charm. They’re not from the actual Black Bodhi.”
“…You’re saying it’s just a coincidence?”
“Of course it’s not. They’re calling it the ‘Fruit of Life’…that’s got to be the Pomegranate Lockseed.”
“…So there *is* a connection!”
“Yeah. That man — the one calling himself Kugai Kudou — is definitely behind this.”

Part 2

It was called a “church” — but in practice, it was more like a small multi-tenant building rental.
They mainly were involved with missionary work and some volunteer activities. There were no particular obligations forced on them.
Anyone could come and go as they pleased. If they lost interest, they were allowed to leave at any time — a flexibility that left more and more Black Bodhi followers eager to join.
After a “trial period” of one week, they would be officially registered as believers and offered the “Fruit of Life”.
A young woman had just finished her trial period, and was going through with the procedure to be confirmed with the church.
— It was Chucky of Team Gaim.
“Then, once again. Welcome to Black Bodhi. We look forward to your patronage from here on out.”
A mild-mannered elderly man welcomed Chucky with a smile.
“T-Thank you very much…”

Feeling somewhat tense, Chucky bowed her head.
One of the executives brought over a suitcase. He was an executive with strong features and tattoos all over his arms, and certainly the last kind of person you would expect to be deeply religious. But in spite of his appearance, he had a perpetual gentle smile on his face.
The executive opened the suitcase and showed its contents to Chucky.
In it was the "Fruit of Life" that had been hidden under cloth during her trial period — the Pomegranate Lockseed.
"Please carry it close with you at all times."
"I-I will."
Chucky instinctively took the Lockseed from the executive with both hands.
In that moment, a numbing sensation spread from her palms through her entire body.
"…!"
Joy was swelling from deep within her chest, and her body felt light, as if she were flying.
She wanted to throw everything away and give into the euphoria — or at least, such thoughts floated through her head for a moment.
(*Yeah, this thing is real scary…*)

One week earlier, in Team Gaim's garage.
Mitsuzane and the others were discussing the Black Bodhi members Peko had encountered in front of the station.
In front of them was an open suitcase.
The Pomegranate Lockseed, which they'd stolen from the street gang earlier, was inside.
"So this is the Pomegranate Lockseed…"
Mitsuzane had to hold Rat back from reaching out to touch it.
"Try not to touch it. If you come into contact with it for too long, you might end up brainwashed."

“Aaaack!...R-Right, yeah.”
Rat quickly drew his hands back. Reorganizing his thoughts, Mitsuzane continued the conversation.
“The ‘good luck charm’ probably originated from some of the missing gang members. They were brainwashed, and then they started spreading the Pomegranate Lockseeds into the general public.”
“So all of those recent suicide bombings...” said Rica, addressing Mitsuzane.
“They’re trying to make everyone nervous. More and more people will want something to cling onto, and they’ll be in the perfect position to go for the Pomegranate Lockseeds...”
“Dammit! This Black Bodhi cult’s making a mockery out of human lives!”
Zack couldn’t hold back any longer. Black Bodhi was at the point of dragging ordinary people into this and getting them to self-destruct.
“But that should make it easier to track down the Pomegranate Lockseeds. We might be able to get a lead on where their hideout is.”
“Did you come up with a plan, Micchy?”
“...”
Mitsuzane suddenly fell silent. He had, in fact, come up with an idea, but he was reluctant to say what it was.
Back in the old days, he wouldn’t have hesitated for even a second. But now that he was carrying the burden of once having betrayed them all, he was wracked with indecision.
He didn’t want to get anyone else in danger ever again...
“Why don’t we send in a spy to infiltrate Black Bodhi? I can do it!”
Chucky said exactly what Mitsuzane had been thinking, sending him into momentary shock before he quickly got himself together.
“Wait, wait! That might be too dangerous. If anything, I should...”
“That Kugai Kudou guy already knows who Micchy and Zack are, right? It’ll probably be too obvious if either of you go.”
“But...!”

“Hey, Micchy…we all know you’re holding back because you’re too worried about what happened back then. We’re your friends, so let us help you.”
“…”
…They’d seen right through him. Mitsuzane was thoroughly embarrassed. In the end, *they* were the ones who were worried about him.
He was all too painfully aware that he hadn’t grown a single bit since then. He’d tried to behave as prudently as possible, and as a result, he’d lost sight of everything around him. In his desperation, he’d only considered his immediate future and nothing ahead of that…and what came out of it was that one awful year, the one that had left deep scars on himself, and on everyone else. Was it even possible for him to become at least somewhat of a better human being at this point?
As if she could still tell what Mitsuzane was thinking, Chucky continued.
“We all know you’ve changed, Micchy, so…don’t worry about it too much.”
Seeing that Mitsuzane was still silent, Zack spoke up to encourage him.
“That church doesn’t seem too shady, right? It’s probably not that dangerous. And also — “
Zack stared straight into Mitsuzane’s eyes, and then turned to Chucky.
“If something happens, we’ll come back you up right away.”
“…!…Yeah. That goes for me, too, of course!”
Saying those words helped Mitsuzane make up his mind. There was no point in having so much self-pity, like some kind of coward. No matter how awkward and unsightly he was, he had to keep moving forward. At the very least, he had to make sure to not repeat the same mistakes all over again.
“Thanks, Chucky…all right, this is my request. Please go in and join Black Bodhi as a member, and find out what’s going on in there.”
“Got it, leave it to me!”

And thus, Chucky was there.
“Excuse me, is there a restroom…?”

Having finished the process of receiving her “Fruit of Life”, Chucky rushed into the bathroom.
Now that she was out of sight, she pulled out a case from her bag, placed the Pomegranate Lockseed into it, and put a replica Lockseed into her pocket.
“There we go…”
She then started whispering her report into a small radio she’d hidden.
“Chucky here. I got the ‘Fruit of Life’. As we thought, it’s a Lockseed.”
“Try not to touch the Lockseed for as long as you can. We’ll come get it later.”
Mitsuzane’s voice was audible from the other end of the radio transmission.
“Got it. Oh, also, Micchy, it’s exactly as you thought. One of the executives was a gangster. Yeah, it was an Inferno member. I’m pretty sure I saw his face earlier when I was tracking him down.”
“Are you okay? Do you think they’ve caught onto you?”
“Don’t think so. I think I’m good for now. I’ll keep prodding around.”
“Okay. Be careful.”
The church Chucky was infiltrating had a parking lot around 200 meters from it.
A car was parked deep inside, in a space that couldn’t be seen from the main street. Mitsuzane, who was in the passenger seat, sighed in relief.
“Looks like things went okay so far. But now, what happens after…”
If Chucky kept a good eye on the former gang member, she could probably find even more clues that would lead them to Black Bodhi. But at this point, they needed to have even more caution.
The gang members were likely to be brainwashed. In other words, they were directly connected to Black Bodhi. The risks were high.
If they rushed too quickly into it and made a mistake, Chucky herself would be put into danger.
“They’re definitely planning something big back there…We’re going to get to the bottom of this.”

Part 3

“The cycle of life. The passing of all.”
A concrete palace. Countless columns lined up side by side. A staircase that crawled up the wall.
Within the vast space, Kugai Kudou’s voice echoed in all directions.
“Let us rejoice. We, who were exiled from the forest, shall climb a different staircase to salvation.”
There were more than ten times as many “believers” as there were before.
The Pomegranate Lockseeds were slowly eating into the minds of their holders, and into the entire city of Zawame.
“The time of the end is near…”
“Save us who are lost…”
Like the souls of the dead clawing for a spider’s thread hanging from the heavens[1], the believers reached towards Kugai.
“At the end of this ever-changing universe, my wishes and salvation shall bear fruit!”

As Kugai chanted his words, the believers' Pomegranate Lockseeds began emitting red light in unison.

"We've got an emergency! Something's happened with Chucky!"
The stress was clearly apparent in Zack's voice through the smartphone receiver.
Zack had been watching the church from the car in the parking lot, but something seemed to have happened inside.
"What happened?"
As he was asking the question, Mitsuzane grabbed his jacket from a chair and leapt out of the garage.
"Seems like all of the church believers were locked in a trance. An executive is driving them somewhere on a minibus."
"What about Chucky?"
"She pretended she was also in a trance and joined them on the minibus. I haven't heard from her since."
"You know where she is, right?"
Chucky's radio had a GPS tracker on it, which let the others know of her location through a dedicated device.
"Yeah. They're headed right down New Zawame Street2."
"Keep an eye on them. I'll call a taxi and get us over there. We'll meet on the way."
"Got it!"

The minibus headed north through the city, with Chucky and the cultists onboard.
On top of the one minibus, there were other passenger cars and buses accompanying them to the same place.
It seemed there were others being controlled by the Pomegranate Lockseeds who were going in the same direction, far more than simply just the church members.

Zack and Mitsuzane had met up and were now following the bus from a kilometer behind, following the GPS signal coming from Chucky's radio.
The icon indicating her position moved at a steady pace along the map, stopped nearby the river in the central area of the city, and suddenly vanished.
It seemed she must have entered some kind of building where radio signals were jammed —
"Wait, isn't that supposed to be an empty riverbank?"
They parked the car a short distance from where the signal had disappeared and searched around the area, but there was no sign of any building.
"No, but right here, there's…"
The Zawame Underground Floodway — a huge underground channel made to discharge waterfall from the heavy rain and prevent it from flooding the city.
It had been completed around ten years prior, but poor quality construction had led to erosion and land sinking, and the area was largely neglected.
Right where Chucky's signal had vanished, there was supposed to be a huge underground pool made to store the water from the floodway, or in other words, a surge tank.
"Are they using this as their hideout?"
"It's out of the way and hard to run into by accident, and they can use the underground water tunnels to go anywhere in the city."
It was still hard to tell what Black Bodhi was up to, but there was no doubt things were only going to get worse from here.
"Our first priority is getting Chucky out of there as soon as possible."
Seeing Zack full of resolve, Mitsuzane nodded in response.
"We don't have time to waste. I know we don't have much of a plan, but let's just charge in and see what happens."

“We can’t allow you in here without permission.”
A fence had been set up around the underground surge tank, and a guard was standing in front.
“Please, I’m a university student, I need to take field notes on the underground floodway for a report…”
Mitsuzane was lying with a straight face, but it wasn’t long before he noticed the guard’s empty and unfocused eyes.
“Ah…we’re in trouble.”
The guard pulled out a Pomegranate Lockseed, and Mitsuzane and Jack immediately were set on edge.
“We’ve got a problem here. He’s gonna blow himself up!”
“Knock him down before he can!”
But neither of them had anticipated what the guard was about to do.
The Pomegranate Lockseed clicked open, and a Crack opened up.
There was something resembling black mist pouring in from the other side of the crack. Just then, a jarring noise started to fill the air.
No, it was something else. The “noise” was actually the humming of wings, and the “black mist” was a swarm of flying insects.
The huge swarm of insects latched onto Mitsuzane and Zack.
“Gaaaaah! T-This! This is…!”
Zack and Mitsuzane desperately tried to shake off the insects swarming around them. They seemed to be much like the kinds of grasshoppers and locusts one could find on Earth.
But once Zack and Mitsuzane finally managed to shake off the insects, they began gathering into a small area of space —
“…!?”
The myriad of insects “transformed” into a single, abnormal shape.
If you had to call it something, it would be something akin to a grasshopper man, or a locust monster. It was an alien lifeform that did not exist within the Earth’s ecosystem.

But the two of them were already familiar with something very much like this.

“An Invase!?”

“…Something like that. There was an Armored Rider named Kougane, and he used one of these.”

Seven months after Helheim had vanished, Mitsuzane and the others had been attacked by an Armored Rider who called himself Kougane.

In the end, they never truly figured out who Kougane actually was. Since he had knowledge of the Femushinmu, a race of beings that Helheim had once annihilated, Mitsuzane’s older brother, Takatora, had speculated that Kougane was “a remnant of the Overlords”.

There had been another incident earlier, when an Overlord named Lapis had created a world out of the collective unconscious — that is to say, a dream world — and trapped everyone in it.

Kougane — a demon being created from a false Golden Fruit — had also been trapped in that world, and had engaged them in a fight to the death.

…But Mitsuzane had no memory of that, nor did the others. The only one who remembered was Kouta Kazuraba, who had long since departed Earth.

“Watch out!”

The locust monster lunged at them with terrifying force, and Mitsuzane and Zack only managed to dodge it at the last second. As they dodged, they pulled out their Lockseeds.

“Transform!”

The locust monster attempted to attack them while they were still unprotected, but the steel grapes and walnut that emerged from the Cracks continuously kept getting in its way.

The locust monster was pushed back and blown away. As if acting in response, the two fruits headed straight back to where they were over Mitsuzane and Zack’s heads.

The steel fruits unfolded into invincible armor, and covered both of them.

Armored Rider Ryugen and Armored Rider Knuckle had appeared.
“Graaaaaaah!”
Knuckle went on the attack. Boiling with anger, he struck the locust monster with repeated punches. But instead of fighting back, the locust monster simply backed away, and it took only one deadly blow from Zack to tear it apart…
“Huh!?”
But in that same moment, the locust monster’s body became a flock of smaller locusts, slipping right through Knuckle’s punch.
The flock reformed into the locust monster right behind Knuckle. Knuckle was hit from behind, and was sent flying backwards.
“Zack!”
Ryugen managed to distract the locust monster with the Grape Dragun while Knuckle stood up again.
“Ow…you gotta be kidding me.”
“Looks like we’ll have to blow up the entire thing in one shot.”
“Yeah…all right, you ready?”
Ryugen would start loading a shot on the Grape Dragun, while Knuckle would keep it occupied with his punches.
Knuckle and the locust monster fought back and forth in an offensive and defensive cycle, and after the battle had raged on for long enough, Knuckle managed a straight punch on the locust monster with his right arm, causing it to stagger.
“There’s your chance! Go for it, Micchy!”
While Knuckle had been fighting off the monster, Ryugen had finished charging up energy.
He pushed down the cutting blade attached to his belt buckle, and the system voice could clearly be heard.
Grape Squash!
“Hraaaaaaagh!”

The Grape Dragun shot out a powerful energy burst that took the shape of a dragon and headed towards the locust monster!
The locust monster, feeling pain through its body, attempted to disperse into a swarm once again, but…
“Not so fast!”
Knuckle pushed down the cutting blade three times. His entire body was surging with power.
Walnut Sparking!
Knuckle released a large burst of walnut-shaped energy from his fist.
Crushed between all of the energy bursts, the locust monster exploded.
Any smaller locusts trying to escape from its body were also swallowed up by the explosion and burned to a crisp.
“That’s more like it.”
Feeling proud of himself, Zack released his transformation, but Ryugen could still sense incoming danger.
“Zack! The security guards!”
They turned back to see the guard attempting to activate the Pomegranate Lockseed.
“He’s gonna blow himself up!?”
“Gh…!”
Ryugen shot precisely enough to send the Pomegranate Lockseed flying out of the guard’s hand. Not wasting a moment, Zack followed up with a punch, and the guard collapsed.
Finally able to release his transformation, Mitsuzane let out a deep breath.
“Don’t let your guard down.”
“…Sorry about that. Thanks.”
“We knocked out a guard, so it’s only a matter of time before they figure out we’re here. We’d better hurry.”

Part 4

“...That’s a lot,” muttered Zack.
The two of them were standing on a catwalk above the surge tank, and were looking down into it.
The Pomegranate Lockseeds had manipulated the people into gathering there, in a 20-by-200-meter area made for collecting rainwater. There was no doubt about it; this was the Black Bodhi hideout.
“Even the thought of all these people being used for terrorist stuff creeps me out...”
They could easily use the waterway to cause explosions in any part of the city.
Police stations, fire stations, hospitals...they could destroy every single public essential utility and facility.
And on top of that, there was the Saver System...if they brought that out in all of the chaos, Zawame would be completely wiped off of the map.
“Anyway, we gotta find Chucky...”
“Let’s head down.”

Mitsuzane and Zack looked around the crowd, searching for Chucky. No one there took notice of them. All of them were standing there doing nothing, staring ahead with empty eyes.

But since the two of them were making themselves obvious by moving through the crowd in search of Chucky, it wasn't long before she caught sight of them.

"Micchy! Zack!"

"Chucky! You okay!?"

"Yeah. It was pretty scary, but I had faith in you guys, I knew you'd come and help."

"We promised, after all. Now that we've found you…"

Mitsuzane looked around. There was still no reaction from anyone, and everyone was still standing there and staring into space. But the more he looked at them, the more he started to feel something strange…

"It's been like that ever since I got here. I tried shaking someone around a bit, but…everyone else did the exact same thing."

It was just as Chucky had said. Even the slightest movements were synchronized between all of them. Was this also from the Pomegranate Lockseed?

"Well, as long as they're not bothering us. Let's use this chance and get out of here."

"…Zack. Take Chucky and go. I'm going to stay here and look a little deeper."

"Hey, wait, it's too dangerous! We can't just leave you here by yourself."

"But if this really is the Black Bodhi hideout, they must be keeping *that* here."

"You mean the Saver System?"

"If we're right and the Saver System really is a scalar weapon, it'll be too big for them to find an easy place to hide it. Which means…"

"…It's probably around here."

After hearing what Mitsuzane had to say, Zack nodded.

"All right. I'll take Chucky from here. But be careful, okay?"

“I will. Thanks.”
Once Mitsuzane had made sure Zack and Chucky were through the waterway and on their way back to the city, he headed deeper into the surge tank.
He emerged from the passageway to find the sunlight beaming down from overhead.
He’d been used to the darkness inside, so his eyes took a moment to adjust.
“…”
A pit, like a mine shaft, was drilled far into the ground.
Water had been collected from all over the city, and was flowing into it like a giant well.
Abandoned construction work, a seventy-meter deep tunnel with steel frames exposed in some areas — and something that caught Mitsuzane’s eye.
“It’s the Saver System!”
An antenna with a complex shape was installed in such a way that it fit snugly into the pit.
It was like a giant Bodhi tree growing within the depths of the earth.
“That antenna must be emitting electromagnetic waves. The core unit for the output device would be…over there.”
The bottom of the pit. A group of mechanical devices arranged around the base of the antenna — it seemed to be the Saver System’s core.
Mitsuzane started running down the stairs that spiraled around the walls of the pit.
” — I expected you would come, Mitsuzane Kureshima.”
“You’re…!?”
In only a blink of an eye, a ghostly man was standing on top of the Saver System.
It was the man who called himself Kugai Kudou.
“When did you…”
“I have already told you. If you reject my salvation, I must eliminate you.”
A large number of Cracks opened around the man. Swarms of locusts

poured out of them and rushed towards Mitsuzane.
“Gh…! Transform!”
He shot the Grape Dragun at a locust monster as it lunged towards him. The locust monster exploded, but in that same moment, another one grabbed Ryugen from the side.
“Ack!”
The scuffle caused Ryugen to lose his grip on the Grape Dragun, and it fell to the bottom of the pit.
Left barehanded and without his specialty weapon, Ryugen was blown back by the next attack as the staircase railing behind him broke off.
“Aaaaaaaaah!”
He fell dozens of meters and hit the bottom of the pit, where the Saver System output device’s ceiling was. The Armored Rider armor protected Mitsuzane to some extent, but he still took enough damage that he struggled to stand up.
The locust monsters lunged together on Ryugen to finish him off.
“I won’t die yet…not here…!”
With trembling hands, Mitsuzane replaced the Grape Lockseed in his belt with another one. A different set of armor appeared over Ryugen and covered him.
Kiwi Arms! The ring of onslaught! Sei-yah-ha!
In a bulkier set of armor, Ryugen had a large circular weapon — a Kiwi Attack Wheel — in each hand.
Trying to push back the locust monsters coming at him from all directions, Ryugen swung both wheels around as they spun.
“Hyaaaaaaah!”
Ryugen’s circular movements spread energy from the wheels’ blades, cutting through all of the locust monsters at once!
“Ugh…gh!”
But using such huge attacks, let alone after taking damage from a fall, took a

toll on Mitsuzane's body. His transformation released itself automatically to prevent him from taking any more.
As Mitsuzane fell to his knees and started breathing heavily, Kugai Kudou looked down at him with a cold expression.
"Well done, Mitsuzane Kureshima. But this seems to be your limit."
As Kugai said this, more Cracks opened up and more and more locust monsters started piling in. Mitsuzane's heart was starting to fill with despair.
"…I can't give up! If Kouta were here, he wouldn't give up, either!"
Mitsuzane was desperately trying to encourage himself, but the locust monsters were relentless —

Melon Energy!

Arrows of light rained down on the locust monsters, piercing through all of them.
"Wait, I know that attack…!"
Mitsuzane's eyes widened in shock. Even Kugai's expression had changed.
Mitsuzane had very clearly seen Kugai's blank expression turn into obvious irritation.
"You had to come and stand before me again…"
Kugai looked up towards where the arrows of light had come from.
On top of the spiral staircase, backed by the sunlight shining through the open pit, was the majestic sight of a white Armored Rider, holding a bow and standing firm.
Or, in other words —
"…Takatora Kureshima."
Armored Rider Zangetsu Shin had arrived!

Part 5

As Zangetsu Shin leaned onto the staircase railing, he started up a device that resembled his Lockseed. It was the Dandeliner, a flight vehicle developed by Yggdrasill.
Zangetsu Shin jumped onto the Dandeliner and descended into the pit.
"...Transform."
Kugai Kudou used both of his Lockseeds to transform into Armored Rider Saver.
In his hand was the Saver Arrow, a bow much like the Sonic Arrow that shot arrows of darkness. Energy arrows started heading towards Zangetsu Shin as he rode the Dandeliner down.
Zangetsu Shin deftly steered the Dandeliner around the arrows, occasionally using the blades on the Sonic Arrow to deflect them, and charged straight towards Saver.
He jumped off the Dandeliner above Saver and swung down the Sonic Arrow. At the same time, Saver slashed the Saver Arrow from the other direction. Their blades clashed against each other, and energy collided against energy

into scattering sparks. In the midst of their locked blades, the two Armored Riders glared at each other.
“Kugai Kudou! How are you still alive!?”
“I have transcended life and death itself. Ryouma Sengoku seems to have held you in high esteem, but in the end, you, Takatora Kureshima, are still bound to a human body.”
Both of them jumped back, as if repelled by impact, and began shooting arrows at each other.
“Takatora!”
“I heard about everything from your friends! Good work, Mitsuzane!”
Even as he addressed Mitsuzane, his attack remained forceful. Zangetsu Shin and Saber placed Lockseeds on their bows, increasing their energy output even further.
Melon Energy!
Pomegranate Charge!
Their special attacks collided between them, and the opposing forces repelled each other into an explosion.
“I’ll take care of him here! Mitsuzane, go and destroy the Saver System!”
“Got it!”
Still recovering from the whiplash and pain, Mitsuzane started running towards the main Saver System unit.
This distracted Saver for a moment as he turned towards Mitsuzane, and Zangetsu Shin took the opportunity to slash at him.
Saver managed to catch the attack by holding the Saver Arrow and a single-bladed sword — a crimson Great Orange Arc — in a cross formation.
“What are all of these terrorist attacks for? What’s Black Bodhi trying to do?”
“This is not terrorism. This is salvation.”
“Brainwashing people with Pomegranate Lockseeds and getting them to self-destruct? What nonsense is that?!”
His anger was strong enough for his slash to break through both weapons.

Saver fell back and staggered, but he continued to look straight at Zangetsu Shin.
“It is not self-destruction. It is simply that their bodies can no longer contain the Pomegranate Lockseed’s energy.”
“What?”
“But that was the blessing of evolution — just as the way I was before.”
“What do you mean by that?!”
Zangetsu Shin went further on the attack. His attacks were faster than the eye could see, but Saver managed to deflect them with the Saver Arrow’s blade. Yet he still could not completely block them, and seemed to be doing his utmost to avoid getting fatally wounded.
“What is the Saver System meant for!? Why would you use a scalar weapon to destroy Zawame!?”
In that moment, Takatora felt chills run up his spine.
He could feel it — Kugai Kudou’s cold smile behind the mask.
“The Saver System is not anything like a scalar weapon.”
“No way…”
Mitsuzane had arrived at the Saver System’s main unit, but he hadn’t been prepared for what was now before his eyes.
The system certainly did seem to be that of a scalar weapon, but there was a very clear difference.
The Saver System’s core was full of Helheim plants.
But it wasn’t mere cultivation. The plants were intricately combined with the Saver System’s machines, to the point of fusing together and forming a carefully managed system. Mitsuzane had seen a device like this before.
“…It’s like the one Redyue made.”
Redyue. A part of Mitsuzane’s past regrets.
She had survived Helheim’s annihilation of the Femushinmu, and was the most cunning and brutal of the Overlords.

Mitsuzane had worked with Redyue once before. At the time, she'd developed a device that would fuse Earth machines with Femushinmu magic in order to revive her queen, the wife of the Femushinmu king Roshuo.
The Saver System, right there in front of Mitsuzane, was very much like that.
A grotesque system made with another world's technology.
This was not a scalar weapon…but something much more horrifying.

"Ryouma Sengoku initially attempted to create an Apple Lockseed by using a system that produced false Golden Fruits. The experiment was a failure, and he decided to abandon that approach. But he built off of the data from the reconstructed Apple Lockseeds to complete the Sengoku Driver…"
Saber kept talking as Zangetsu Shin continued to barrage him with attacks.
"No. It was not a failure. As the test subject, I lost my physical body, but my very being evolved into a higher plane. Ryouma Sengoku was a fool to have abandoned his initial theory!"
"Higher? What are you even talking about!? Who even are you?!"
The force of Zangetsu Shin's attacks was as strong as ever through the questioning. One of his attacks resulted in an explosion, and Saber fell to his knees.
"With this many followers, we should have more than enough energy to activate the Saver System."
Takatora could feel even stronger chills.
We have to stop this man before he goes any further — so said his intuition, the same intuition that had brought him through many levels of hell.
"Not on my watch!"
While Saver was still struggling to get up, Zangetsu Shin put all of his strength into a single ruthless blow.
Melon Energy Squash!
The trajectory of his blade, shining in emerald green, cut Saver in two.
Yes, that should have done it.

“…I don’t have time to be sitting around here in shock. I’ve got to destroy the Saver System.”
Regardless of whatever black magic the Saver System was made of, all he had to do was destroy it now, and that would be the end of it.
Mitsuzane took out his Lockseed and was about to transform into Ryugen —
“You cannot stop my salvation.”
“…!?”
With no warning whatsoever, Kugai Kudou appeared right in front of Mitsuzane.
“No way…Weren’t you back there fighting my brother!?”
“I will be the one to bring Ryouma Sengoku’s discarded plans to fruition! Let us rejoice, for now is the time we have long awaited!”
Kugai’s voice was full of emotion as the Saver System began emitting a red light.
“What are you doing!?”
“Come, all, and witness the creation of my paradise!”
“The time of the end is near…!”
“Save us who are lost…!”
The believers gathered in the surge tank had their Pomegranate Lockseeds in their hands, which were now glowing a bright scarlet.
In that one moment, all of their thoughts and feelings were synchronized through the Pomegranate Lockseed.
They were together in Kugai Kudou’s world.
They were Kugai Kudou, and they were the world itself. They had reached a place of so-called omniscience and omnipotence, and were drenched in unprecedented euphoria.
And then — their physical bodies disappeared. Their minds had become energy of a higher plane, dwelling within the Saver System.
The savior’s machine — the Deus ex Machina — had started.

On that day, the city of Zawame was engulfed by the Bodhi.

Chapter 4

Part 1

It loomed over the city of Zawame in the same way Yggdrasill Tower once had.
The giant Bodhi tree broke through the underground floodway and rose into the sky, as if reaching for the heavens.
It invoked the memory of a tower that was once there, occupied by the Overlords and covered in Helheim plants.
Seeing such a familiar nightmare, did the people of Zawame tremble with anxiety, or fall into panic?
They did neither.
After the encroachment of Helheim and the invasion of Megahex, there was now a third catastrophe in the city of Zawame — but this time, no one paid any heed to it.
— Like the Pomegranate Lockseed puppets, every single person in Zawame had fallen into a trance state.

“The time of the end is near…”
A young man was hobbling left and right as he wandered around the main

street.
His eyes were as empty as the others, and his heart seemed to be completely absent.
“Save us…who are lost…”

“You imbeciiiiiiile!”

…A large bowl came swinging downwards.
It struck the young man on the head, and he crumbled to the ground.
As he stared back in a daze, a giant man was looking back at him from above.
“Dear goodness…I thought I trained you better than this. Look here, I brought you a Driver from Sir Melon.”
The man placed a Sengoku Driver on the young man’s waist. A belt emerged from the buckle, and the young man now had the Sengoku Driver wrapped firmly around him.
“Ow ow ow…Huh? Oren? When did you get back…actually, wait, what happened to me…”
The young man — Hideyasu Jounouchi — had returned to his senses. He looked around, confused as to what had happened.
“Whatever you do, don’t take off that Driver. As long as you have that on, Kugai Kudou won’t be able to do anything to you for the time being.”
The giant man — Oren Pierre Alfonzo — also had a Sengoku Driver wrapped around his waist.
After an attempted coup in a certain country and the Neo Baron incident, Oren had been busy flying around the world and investigating into Black Bodhi, but once he’d learned about the ongoing crisis in Zawame, he’d immediately returned.
“I don’t understand what’s happening right now, but…it seems to be something very awful,” said Jounouchi.
He looked up at the giant Bodhi tree towering over them, a bitter expression on his face.

“Yes, we’ll discuss it later, so come with me. But first…”
A swarm of locusts, buzzing with a piercing noise, was flying towards them.
Seeing the swarm of locusts turn into a locust monster, Jounouchi had a very obvious look of dismay on his face.
“I fought something exactly like that before, but it beat me to a pulp…”
“Seems they’re not fans of us being un-brainwashed.”
Oren threw a Lockseed towards Jounouchi. After catching it and realizing what it was, a huge smile spread across his face.
“Oh! It’s the Acorn! Hell yeah!”
Jounouchi held up the Acorn Lockseed while Oren held up his Durian Lockseed, and their next word rang out through the air.
“Transform!”
The feeling of the armor wrapping around him — it was something Jounouchi hadn’t felt in a very long while.
There had been many stressful things about his days as an Armored Rider.
There were many memories that were too painful to remember.
And yet, all of it was precious to him. That was undeniable fact.
Acorn Arms! Never give up!
The esteemed champion that harbored Jounouchi’s carefully refined training and fighting spirit: Armored Rider Gridon!
Durian Arms! Mister Dangerous!
Oren transformed into Bravo and stood next to Gridon.
“All right, let’s clean them all up!”
“Yes! I’m afraid you’re out of luck today! Know the power of a *pâtissier*! Hyah!”
It was the return of the Armored Rider duo of teacher and disciple.

Part 2

It was the day after their battle in the underground floodway.
The Saver System had activated, and the Bodhi tree had sprouted out of the pit at a rapid pace.
Once Takatora and Mitsuzane had managed to escape, they saw a giant Bodhi tree large enough to overlook the entire city, and the people there wandering around with vacant expressions.
Apparently, the Bodhi tree was spreading the Pomegranate Lockseed's effect over a wide area. Even their Beat Rider friends were not immune.
However, Takatora, Mitsuzane, Zack, and Oren, who all were wearing Sengoku Drivers, were safe. The Sengoku Driver had originally been made to resist Helheim's influence, and so Takatora had deduced that, since the Bodhi tree was likely to be using Helheim's power, it would be unable to affect anyone with a Sengoku Driver. After all, Kaito Kumon had once used a Genesis Driver to control his Helheim infection.
Takatora, Mitsuzane, and Zack were now gathered together in Team Gaim's garage.

Chucky and the other team members were also there…but they were all staring into space, their eyes devoid of light.
Seeing all of this happening around him, Mitsuzane's face was a mixture of anger and agony.
"Don't make that face, Micchy. Everything's quiet for now. Things should still be okay."
Zack put a hand on Mitsuzane's shoulder to encourage him, but it was more like he was encouraging himself.
"But when something *does* happen…What if they all end up like the people down there…?!"
"Here's our most important question. What is Kugai Kudou's ultimate objective?"
Takatora, who had been pondering all of this in his head, had finally spoken up.
"Objective…he's trying to brainwash everyone in Zawame, right?"
"And what would he accomplish by doing that?"
"Well, um…y'know."
"Kugai Kudou kept talking about salvation. He said he was blessing everyone with evolution, to make everyone the same as how he was before."
"…The hell does that mean?"
"…The same as himself? Didn't he die in the Lockseed experiment?"
Mitsuzane was also deep in thought, grasping for some kind of idea.
"*J'ai une question!* Is that really Kugai Kudou? Shouldn't that be impossible?"
In came Oren, accompanied by a very exhausted-looking Jounouchi.
Zack suddenly brightened up at the sight of Jounouchi.
"Jounouchi! You're back to normal!"
"Yeah, well…I had a bit of a hard time after that…"
"Goodness…you really had trouble with *that* much of a small fry? It was hardly that big of a deal."
"Okay, but I pulled it off in the end, didn't I? I took the Malletcorn[1] and

smashed it flat! Like a bug!"
"Yes, yes, well, let's get back to the subject. So…what do you think, Sir Melon?"
"Well, it sounds ridiculous, but…it's definitely the same Kugai Kudou as before. I have no choice but to admit that."
"So he really is a ghost…?" muttered Zack.
Mitsuzane shook his head in response.
"No, he's definitely got some kind of substantial presence. We fought him directly, remember?"
"But every time we finish him off, he keeps coming back to life."
"The key to all of this has to be in the initial Lockseed experiment, the one where he was a test subject. If we start there…"
Takatora seemed to have also reached the same conclusion, and, nodding, he followed up on Mitsuzane's words.
"But any information on that experiment has been erased from Yggdrasill's records. If anyone knew anything about it, it would be…"
Takatora's words faltered as he parsed all sorts of emotions at once.
After a while, Takatora finally said the name.
"…Ryouma."

The international conglomerate known as "Yggdrasill" no longer existed. Yggdrasill Tower had also been dismantled, and with it, Ryouma Sengoku's laboratory.
Takatora had intended to dispose of a large amount of their materials and experimental data, because they were far too dangerous to be allowed out in the open.
But in actuality, Takatora had been collecting data related to Ryouma Sengoku in secret and keeping it on tight lockdown.
At the Kureshima residence, everyone gathered around a computer that Ryouma Sengoku had operated in the past. Although it took a long while,

they eventually managed to get through its tight security.
But now, even though they'd found a folder that seemed to have data relevant to the Apple Lockseed experiment, when they tried to open it…
"No dice. I can't remove the lock…"
Mitsuzane sighed. They'd tried every possible option, but nothing had come out of it.
"Is this really as far as we can go…?"
Ryouma was the kind of person who would never allow his own data to be hacked.
Are we back at square one? thought Takatora, about to give up…and then.
"Hey. If someone's accessing this file, that means Kugai Kudou's back, right?"
"Ryouma!?"
A window on the screen had opened out of nowhere, and a video was playing there.
The person in the video was, without a doubt, Ryouma Sengoku.
"I wonder who's watching this right now? Is it you, Mitsuzane? Or is it Takatora?…Well, either works."
"What's going on!?"
"I don't know…It started playing on its own…"
The computer no longer responded to any inputs. The video with Ryouma continued playing.
"I prepared this program just in case. I don't know what the world will look like if I'm not there, but…the thought of that third-rate piece of trash getting ahead of himself is truly unpleasant."
"This is a surprise…"
Both Takatora and Mitsuzane were shocked at Ryouma Sengoku's sheer level of preparation.
And on top of that, he'd even predicted that either Mitsuzane or Takatora would be the one to open the file.

“We’ll start by cutting straight to the chase. Kugai Kudou is an Overlord.”
Hearing the word “Overlord” put everyone at a loss for words. Ryouma continued from within the video.
“To be more accurate, he’s something resembling an Overlord. He lost his physical body in the initial Apple Lockseed experiment and became a being of pure energy. He’s no longer constrained by this material world. For that reason, he can appear in unexpected places and return from death many times over.”
As Mitsuzane listened to the explanation, he remembered Mai Takatsukasa. Ryouma Sengoku had ended her life in his quest for the Golden Fruit. But after losing her body, she became the “Woman of the Beginning”, the one who observed and confirmed the final direction of the Golden Fruit.
As the Woman of the Beginning, she was no longer constrained by physical space, and was even able to travel through time. Did this mean Kugai was the same kind of being as her?
…Even now, every time he remembered her, Mitsuzane could feel a tight and painful sensation in his chest. It would likely still be that way for the rest of his life. No, it needed to stay that way. That was the price he had to pay for his own sins.
And he had sworn to Mai and Kouta, many times over. He would protect the world they had entrusted to him. He had to become a true hero. That was the only way he could atone.
It didn’t matter what they were, even if they were something that resembled gods. The oath he had made to them would never change.
They had to stop Kugai Kudou, no matter what. Mitsuzane shifted his focus back to what Ryouma was saying in the video.
“But his presence is quite weak. Normally, he shouldn’t be able to interfere with the physical world. That’s right, Kugai Kudou is truly like a ghost. The only thing that lets him have any kind of physical presence is his Driver.”
“He means that unusual Driver he was wearing, right?”

Takatora thought back to his fight against Saver. He'd been using a Genesis Driver prototype, which was similar to the Genesis Core that served as an expansion unit for the Sengoku Driver. But…

"It's not the one I created, of course. When I fought against him earlier, the Genesis Driver was still incomplete. He was using a system that shouldn't exist."

It wasn't just the Genesis Core. Saver had carried a black Sonic Arrow even before Ryouma had finished developing it.

"I don't have the slightest idea how Kugai Kudou got his hands on that system. Although I do at least have a hypothesis. For instance, if there were a parallel universe…ah, no, we're getting off-topic. In any case, that Driver is sustaining Kugai Kudou's presence in this world."

"So in other words, we just gotta destroy that Driver."

Now that there was an actual possibility of defeating Kugai Kudou, Zack was getting excited. If their opponent truly had been a ghost, there was nothing that could be done, but if it was an opponent they could actually strike and defeat, they had far more of a chance of winning.

"I had to destroy that Driver, too. If he comes back, I imagine he'll probably have used the Pomegranate Lockseeds and manipulated his Black Bodhi cultists into building him a new one. Truly, a nasty piece of work."

It would take a large amount of money and time to create a new Driver. Black Bodhi's international branches were likely created as an organization meant to revive Kugai.

"As for that Pomegranate Lockseed. It's a device that aligns its holder's spirit with Kugai Kudou's. How incredibly pathetic! He's attempting to use the Pomegranate Lockseeds to reproduce the experiment."

"Reproduce the experiment?"

It seemed that Ryouma's explanation was finally about to touch on Kugai's true intentions.

Takatora had a feeling they were about to fill in the missing pieces and get a

full picture.
“When I was developing the Sengoku Driver, the first thing I tried to do was to confirm that the Golden Fruit existed. I tried to create an artificial Golden Fruit with the Apple Lockseed. If the Apple Lockseed worked as planned, it would prove that the Golden Fruit could actually exist. The end result was, well, you know.”
In the initial experiment, the Lockseed had gone out of control, and Kugai Kudou had lost his life. Or, at least, his life as a human being.
“Kugai Kudou became something like an Overlord, and it seems he’s gotten the wrong idea and thinks he can become a god. So now, he can only think about one thing: advancing the original Apple Lockseed theory.”
“…I can’t keep up with this, I’m lost.”
Jounouchi had given up on thinking. Oren was silent, but his stunned expression made it apparent he was in the same boat as Jounouchi. Zack was already lost in thoughts of physically beating up the enemy.
Only Takatora and Mitsuzane fully understood the gravity of what Ryouma was saying.
“Kugai intends to create his own Golden Fruit.”
“…!?”
The Golden Fruit. The one who obtained it would become the one who oversaw evolution — such had been the case with Kouta Kazuraba.
Yet Kouta Kazuraba had rejected the idea of destroying the human world for the sake of evolution. He had taken all of Helheim and departed for a distant star.
But now, Kugai Kudou was trying to create a Golden Fruit and become a new god —
“How incredibly ludicrous. He seriously thinks he can be like a god? Even if he *did* manage to create a Golden Fruit, an artificial one would still be a fake. It would be a far cry from the kind of Golden Fruit that guides evolution. It wouldn’t be ‘gold’ as much as ‘gilded’.”

Ryouma's words were full of spite. It was as if he could tell what everyone was thinking, and it was hard to believe this was actually a prerecorded video.

"Kugai Kudou managed to gain a small amount of higher perspective, and no more than that. Such a thing cannot be called a god. Hey, what do you think the definition of a god is?"

Ryouma's expression reminded Takatora of what he had been like when they'd first met.

A pure seeker of knowledge with shining eyes, who would enthusiastically gush about his new theories through the night and into the morning.

"A god is something that creates a new world. Kugai Kudou has no concept of such a thing. He has no sense of possibility."

Ryouma Sengoku was, ultimately, a truly evil human being. He was a man who had never hesitated to trample on others and steal away their future.

He was that kind of person, and yet he'd still dreamed of a distant future.

He'd dreamed of creating a new world.

"Kugai Kudou is neither a god nor a savior — he's a meaningless, empty ghost."

Part 3

Each and every person had the same movements and the same pace, going in the same direction.
Everyone in Zawame was moving in unison.
Large groups of people were pressing forward, in an uncannily orderly manner.
Their destination was, of course, the giant Bodhi tree overlooking Zawame.
The next part of Kugai Kudou's plan was about to begin.
But at the same time, explosions were going off everywhere around the Bodhi tree. The flames from the detonations spread around the leaves and branches, dyeing the Bodhi tree in red.
A large round object was flying around the Bodhi tree, and a giant hand fired cannonballs from its fingertips at the Bodhi tree.
Watermelon Arms Gyro Mode. Inside it was Armored Rider Zangetsu.
In order to make use of Watermelon Arms, Takatora was wearing a normal Sengoku Driver instead of the Genesis Driver.
A swarm of locusts started latching onto Watermelon Arms, but a beam of

light appeared from elsewhere and burned them away.
“Takatora! I’ll support you from back here!”
“All right, thanks!”
Ryugen was riding the Dandeliner and providing support behind Zangetsu Watermelon Arms, and the Dandeliner was also making its own attacks on the Bodhi tree.
As the swarm of locusts grew even bigger, Watermelon Arms landed on a large branch to face it directly.
The swarm of locusts formed into dozens of locust monsters on their way to attack Zangetsu.
“Armed Mode!”
Watermelon Arms changed from its flying Gyro Mode to its reinforced Armed Mode.
The giant warrior swung around the double-edged spear and slashed through the locust monsters one after another.
Bravo, Gridon, and Knuckle were fighting more locust monsters under the Bodhi tree.
They still didn’t completely understand what this Bodhi tree was, but it was clear that Kugai’s plans had something to do with it.
If they attacked the Bodhi tree, they would be an obstacle to Kugai’s plans, and he would have to show up in person.
Such was how the Armored Riders’ counterattack had begun, from both the ground and air.

Acorn Sparking!
While the Acorn armor was still deploying over his head, Gridon flew straight at the locust monsters, blowing them all up at once.
“H-How was that? Fear me, you little grasshoppers!”
Jounouchi looked around as he stood up, trying to put on a brave face. There were no longer any locust monsters around them.

“Were those the last ones?”
“Reinforcements should be coming soon. Don’t let your guard down.”
Just as Oren had said, something near the bottom of the Bodhi tree was firing tree nut-like objects.
As they fell to the ground in droves, they coalesced into new kinds of monsters right before the trio’s eyes.
“This one’s different!”
They were completely distinct from the locust monsters, and their bodies seemed to be made of plants.
They had vines growing out of their bodies, making them look like pitcher plants walking on two legs.
“*Kwaaaaaaaaah…!*“
Letting out a shriek, the pitcher plant monsters raised their sharp claws and attacked.
“Fine, if that’s what you want, keep it coming!”
The Armored Riders boldly laid down their challenge, without a single sign of exhaustion from all of their repeated battles. The curtain for the second act had fallen.

There was more trouble going on in the air.
After annihilating the locust monsters, Zangetsu Watermelon Arms Gyro Mode and Ryugen’s Dandeliner were attacking the Bodhi tree again.
Countless petals were dancing in the air around them.
“W-What…gh…!?”
The moment Watermelon Arms came in contact with one of the petals, it exploded.
Other petals were caught up in the blast, and exploded in turn, leading to a chain of explosions.
Ryugen sped up the Dandeliner and managed to escape from the blast, but Watermelon Arms was too large to avoid it.

“Takatora!?”
“…Don’t worry about me. I pulled through that one.”
But the system had taken a large amount of damage from the explosion. How much longer would it be able to hold out? — They had to settle this as quickly as possible.
“Your efforts are pointless. None of you can stop my salvation.”
Kugai Kudou’s voice echoed through the air.
“Where are you, Kugai Kudou?!” yelled Mitsuzane in the Dandeliner.
The only response was the electronic voice echoing above both of them.
The heretical advent on stage!
At the top of the Bodhi tree was a giant flower bud.
As the voice spoke, the bud began to open. It was a flower out of place in this world, blooming against the laws of this world.
At the center of the flower was the red Armored Rider, who had now completely made himself into a part of the Bodhi tree.
Sitting in the center of the lotus was the great heavenly demon who carried forth the world’s end — the awakened false god of the lotus, Saver![2]
“…Kugai Kudou!”
“The Saver System has reached completion. The time for salvation has come.”
“Salvation…you mean, creating a Golden Fruit and becoming a god?”
“It seems you have finally arrived at the truth, Takatora Kureshima.”
The voice from behind his mask was faint, but there was an all too apparent sense of superiority within it.
“I shall not abandon humanity as Kouta Kazuraba did. I shall be the one to save all seven billion humans who were exiled from the Helheim forest.”
“How dare you! Kouta carried all of our burdens and saved us all! He worked so hard to create that peace, and now you’re here…!”
The insult to Kouta had set Mitsuzane off, but Kugai ignored him.
“Helheim granted us the blessing of evolution, but Kouta Kazuraba’s actions

eternally robbed us of our opportunity to evolve. And now, humanity has no choice but to slowly advance towards ruin."
Kugai's voice was getting progressively clearer. Now that he was closer to his world of euphoria, his calmness was dissolving away.
"But this time, I shall truly guide humanity towards its ultimate evolution! The energy of Helheim's chosen people in Zawame shall bear the Golden Fruit! Humanity shall attain eternal peace!"
Takatora and Mitsuzane recalled the events in the underground floodway, where everyone had been overpowered by the Pomegranate Lockseeds, lost their physical bodies, and turned into energy to power the Saver System.
"We won't allow that! I will never allow this world to be torn apart by malice! I've made that oath many times over!"
"This city is ours! We're not letting you toy with it any longer!"
Zangetsu Watermelon Arms and Ryugen's Dandeliner headed towards Saver. They were greeted by a myriad of vines sprouting from the Bodhi tree, and a number of exploding petals.
"Mitsuzane! Get down!"
Watermelon Arms went around in front of the Dandeliner. Instead of dodging, it shot cannonballs directly at Saver from its fingertips.
As the cannonballs flew, the Bodhi tree's vines punctured through Watermelon Arms' outer shell, and the exploding petals set the entire vehicle on fire, but Zangetsu continued to press on.
"How impulsive of you, Takatora Kureshima!"
"You'll have to excuse me, I've only ever known how to fight on impulse!"
Watermelon Arms was on the verge of collapsing, but Zangetsu forced it to accelerate even faster, with the engine screeching at the sheer degree of damage.
But he was finally in front of Saver, at close range.
Watermelon Arms opened up and transformed into Armed Mode. With the Watermelon Spear, he swung it down in a single blow — !

“Unfortunately for you…”
Saver only sneered back at him…and the spear stopped right in front of his face.
Vines were piercing through Watermelon Arms from all directions, stopping Zangetsu’s final desperate attack right before it was about to hit.
Having reached its limit, Watermelon Arms finally succumbed and was engulfed in a giant explosion. Zangetsu was blown aside and engulfed in the blast…
“I’m still not done yet!”
The flames from the explosion cleared up to reveal a jade-colored steel plate.
The Melon Defender.
It was Zangetsu’s Arms Weapon, an ironclad shield that could be used as a blunt or throwing weapon.
Zangetsu was flying towards Saver on the Melon Defender.
He had used the Melon Defender as a foothold to protect himself from the explosion — no, rather, he was *using* the explosion to propel himself forward.
In other words, he was surfing through the air using the blast momentum.
While launching his next attack on Saver, Zangetsu unlocked his Lockseed.
Melon Energy!
“What!?”
Zangetsu’s Sengoku Driver had a Genesis Core attached to it. It had been extracted from Zangetsu Shin’s Genesis Driver — the one originally used by Megahex’s clone of Ryouma Sengoku.
Zangetsu attached the Melon Energy Lockseed to the Genesis Core.
Mix! Melon Arms! By the providence of Heaven!
Jinba Melon! Ha-hah!
Another set of Arms wrapped around Zangetsu.
It was the advent of the armored warrior unrivaled by all under the heavens — the dazzling and shining Armored Rider Zangetsu Jinba Melon Arms!
“Takatora Kureshimaaaaa!”

The fluttering petals became a storm of petals, and the chain of explosions became a tornado of flames, all heading towards Zangetsu.
The Melon Defender automatically sensed the attack through its force field, and deployed an electromagnetic shield around him.
Relying fully on the Melon Defender as a foothold, Zangetsu broke through the tornado of fire.
Directly right in front of him was Saver, merged into the otherworldly flower.
“This is the end, Kugai Kudou!”
As Takatora yelled out those words, he fired the Sonic Arrow. The arrow of light converged directly on Saver’s abdomen — piercing right through his Sengoku Driver.
“...No!”
Saver stared at the destroyed Sengoku Driver in shock.
The jade-colored shield — Zangetsu and the Melon Defender — was approaching.
Melon Squash! Jinba Melon Squash!
The Melon Defender’s force field had now become a melon-shaped ring of energy.
Zangetsu kicked the Melon Defender with all of his might.
The energy-charged Melon Defender flew at Saver and crushed him under it.
The petals of Saver’s lotus flower — Kugai’s flower — began to scatter rapidly.

The three Armored Riders on the ground had seen what had happened up in the sky.
They saw Saver getting caught up in an explosion, and petals falling everywhere. The trio began to cheer.
“They did it! They did it, Oren!”
“Truly wonderful, Sir Melon!’
Knuckle was on guard against the remaining pitcher plant monsters when he suddenly caught sight of something strange.

The people of Zawame were gathering under the Bodhi tree.
Civilians were walking in through the street, looking up at the Bodhi tree in a daze. Their eyes were still devoid of life or light.
“Kugai Kudou’s gone now, so why are they still brainwashed?”
“…I have a bad feeling about this,” said Oren.

Ryugen rushed in with the Dandeliner to catch Zangetsu in midair.
Below them was Saver’s lotus flower, which had lost most of its petals and had been reduced to the calyx.
“We’re done here, right, Takatora…?”
“Yeah. We’ve completely destroyed his Driver, so this should have finished Kugai Kudou off for once.”
” — It is indeed the end, and also the beginning.”
“…!?”
On top of the lotus flower that had been reduced to a calyx —
The sight of him was dim and faint, as if he were covered in fog. But it was undoubtedly Kugai Kudou.
“That’s impossible! He shouldn’t be able to exist here without a Driver!”
“That is correct, Takatora Kureshima. That Driver was what bound me to this world. But…*I no longer have need for it*.”
“…You don’t need…?” said Mitsuzane.
Kugai Kudou smiled back at him. It was terrifyingly calm — a very dreadful smile.
“Yes. Once humanity has evolved, we shall no longer need this world. Now, the time has come for humanity to break free of its physical restraints and escape the cycle of life…!”
“By evolution, you mean…!”
Takatora’s voice was shaking as he realized the true meaning of Kugai’s words. Kugai’s smile was now completely skewed across his face, like a torn pomegranate.

“All seven billion humans shall become like me. They shall transcend life and death itself — and become true Overlords.”
Kugai’s distorted laughter was accompanied by a golden light surrounding him.
The light was so blindingly dazzling that Zangetsu and Ryugen found themselves completely swallowed up in it.
“Humanity shall attain enlightenment under the Bodhi tree! The time of salvation has arrived! I, Kugai Kudou, am humanity’s savior!”

“No way…”
Jounouchi released his transformation and fell to his knees.
Staring at the Bodhi tree, the people around them dissolved into light and rose into the air.
“…So we’re too late?”
Zack, who was also at a complete loss for what to do, could only look upwards.
The light gathered at the top of the Bodhi tree, where Kugai Kudou was.
And finally, Kugai Kudou himself, who was shining with light, dissolved into it as well.
The light of the people melted together into the calyx of the lotus, and formed into a new creation.
The fruit of the goddess Idunn. The ambrosia fruit of immortality. The forbidden fruit of Eden…
“…The Golden Fruit.”
As Oren mumbled the name in shock, he began dissolving into the light. No, not only Oren; the same was happening to Zack and Jounouchi.
Kugai Kudou’s salvation was at hand, and even the Sengoku Drivers’ protection had been reduced to nothing.
“…It can’t just end like this!”

But no one was there to hear those words of regret. Everything had become light and dissolved.

And so, everyone in the city of Zawame disappeared.
It would not be long before it reached the entire planet.
Kugai Kudou's salvation of humanity had finally been achieved.

...Or had it?

Part 4

The first, most immediate sensation was color.
He was being swallowed by every kind of color in existence.
After that was every other sensation. Sound. Scent. Touch. Visceral sensation — no, everything. Everything was engulfing him.
Everything, a mixture of everything, enveloping him into chaos and beating around him like a storm.
The same state, recurring eternally — and yet all still in a single moment.
The infinite colors eventually condensed into shapes. What had once been an explosion of color had now become a myriad of different scenes.
Taking all of it in, he understood what the flood of sensations was. He had come to understand everything.
Everything before his eyes — everything he could feel was “the world”. Every space and every time was unfolding in front of him.
But there was no joy to be found there.
As he desperately tried to hold his sense of self together, he was swept away by the vast universe.

The infinite plane of worlds, each shining with its own history.
Countless stories of countless worlds, and with them — countless amounts of malice and hostility.
There was something wicked that treated mass slaughter as a game. There was something that resembled an angel of God. There were those who used monsters to kill each other.
Those who had evolved in a different way from Helheim. Those who were beyond death. Evil spirits who devoured humans. Extraterrestrial beings who imitated humans. Demons who wished to alter history. Those who resembled vampires.
And there were more. Those with the memories of the Earth. Incarnations of desire. Those who exploited the energy of the universe. Illusory demons born from despair. One hundred and eight artificial life forms —
Countless stories of countless worlds unfolded in front of him, all tied together by a thread of malice and hostility, made up of one common idea.
"Conflict" — the one thing they all shared was "conflict".
"Life is a cycle of death and rebirth. The world itself is an endless cycle of destruction and recreation. It is nothing but endless hell. We are confined within an unbroken circle."
He could hear a voice.
The voice was like that of a saint, one who came to save those who were lost and guide them towards the truth.
"All love has been lost. We are trapped in hatred. We can no longer reach anything. There is only suffering — but I shall overcome it, all of us shall overcome it. Once we are released from our physical bindings, our spirits shall sublimate, and we shall become one with the vast universe. One in all. All in one. There shall no longer be any suffering. This is our ultimate evolution."
— *You're wrong.*
There was something within him, something that denied the saint's words of

truth.
In this state, he couldn't identify what it was. His sense of self was weak, and he was on the verge of melting into the world and vanishing. But even so, there was "something" that was desperately resisting — something he couldn't let go of, something important.
The saint laughed back at him, as if mocking him for his struggles.
"I am not wrong. You, of all people, should know this best."
The colors exploded yet again. Another violent rush of sensations. And then, silence.

There was someone standing in front of him.
A white silhouette. An armored warrior.
"…Takatora?"
Armored Rider Zangetsu Shin.
Someone he knew very well. But if this really was him…why did he seem so full of hostility?
As if confirming his instincts, Zangetsu Shin attacked him, with a slash that indicated clear intent to kill.
"What's going on, Takatora!? It's me, you know me, right!?"
He barely managed to avoid the attacks as Zangetsu Shin continued the onslaught.
— I'm going to be killed!
He was suddenly filled with a desire to kill, one far beyond merely just wanting to escape.
He transformed and faced Zangetsu Shin.
He let out a battle cry and used the entire strength of his body to strike back.
Strike back. Strike back. Strike back. Strike back. Strike back…
If he missed a single step, he would get hit and buried under an attack.
Don't run away. Fight. I'll fight. I can't survive unless I fight.
Throw out any doubts. No matter who my opponent is or what I have to

sacrifice, it'll all be for nothing if I don't win...!
Zangetsu Shin prepared for a final attack and, with no sign of holding back, struck him down with a finisher.
Up against another enemy who was truly out to kill him —
"Ah..."
Zangetsu Shin mercilessly slashed him down.
He collapsed and looked up at Zangetsu Shin, whose transformation had released to reveal their true face.
"...You're not...Takatora...?"
As he sank into the pool of blood, the person there stared back at him with a cold gaze.
His face was all too familiar.
"...You're me."
He had been killed by Mitsuzane Kureshima — by himself.
No, that wasn't it. The person Mitsuzane Kureshima had killed was not Mitsuzane Kureshima.
"...Takatora."
Their perspectives had swapped. Mitsuzane Kureshima was now looking down at the person he had just killed.
Takatora Kureshima. His own brother.
...That's right. Yes, that's right. I was the one who took everyone around me and —
The graveyard realm...Yomi...Yomi...Yomi...!
His appearance had changed.
Surrounded in miasma, in the garb of a dead man past the point of no return — Ryugen Yomi Deathly Feast Arms.[3]
The memory of this sensation came flooding back.
— I've killed someone yet again.
On the other end of his blade, pierced by the sword and covered in blood, was a familiar face.

“...Kouta?”
Kouta Kazuraba was dead. A meaningless death, like that of an insect.
Ryugen walked away, leaving Kouta Kazuraba’s corpse behind.
Swing down the blade. Someone else was dead.
Swing down the blade. There was a familiar face among them.
Swing down the blade. There were people who had been important to him.
Swing down the blade. Another one, and another. Someone else around him was dead.
Swing down the blade. Each one left him emptier and emptier.
Swing down the blade. And.
Swing down the blade. Right in front of him.
Swing down the blade. The girl whose heart had been gouged out.
“Aaaaaah...! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah..!”
Mitsuzane’s grief and sorrow echoed out through the darkness. But there was no one there who could hear.
He turned around to see a mountain of corpses.
The bloodstained footprints he’d left were proof of his victory.
Yes, Mitsuzane Kureshima would be alone for all eternity. There was no one there to watch him.
— His wish would never reach anywhere.

“Such is the essence of life. As long as you continue to live, as long as you continue to fight, you shall continue to kill. You shall continue to lose everything.”
Mitsuzane heard the saint’s whispers as he cried.
“Helheim is our spider thread sent down from the heavens. Climb it and accept my salvation, or else this world shall be eternal hell for you.”
Everything spread out in front of Mitsuzane.
It was a barren wilderness, full of the “enemy”.
It was everything that had once been an enemy. Everything that had the

potential to become an enemy.
That was — everything in the world.
All of the enemies in the world were attacking Mitsuzane. It was an army of hell.
A swarm of Invase. Locust monsters. Pitcher plant monsters.
An army of Kurokage troopers. A whole unit of Dandeliner and Tulip Hoppers. Watermelon Arms acting without operators.
And even the Overlords.
Overlord King Roshuo. Demushu. Gurinsha. Dyudyuonshu. And…Redyue.
There was an Armored Rider in black who called himself Kougane. There was a golden Armored Rider he didn't recognize.
Megahex, the invader who had converted its own planet into a machine. And. And. And —
Mitsuzane was killed by the enemy. Each time, a voice would say "Live," and he would be revived. And then, he would be killed once again.
It was truly hell. But that was simply the truth of life.
Engulfed by the shadows, Mitsuzane sank into the darkness, and his existence melted into the world.

…Within the darkness, he could sense someone there.
Someone was preventing Mitsuzane's spirit from completely vanishing.
Who are you? There was uncertainty in Mitsuzane's consciousness.
"I'm just passing through," said the person there in response.
Hearing his answer, Mitsuzane was somehow able to guess who he was.
— Ah, he must be the "hero".
The universal archetype within everyone's hearts. When powerless people fell victim to horrifying forces, and were reduced to tears — such heroes would rush in faster than anyone else, like knights[4].
The passing hero asked a question.
You know a man like that, don't you?

— Yeah, I do. Even if I disappear, he's the one thing I could never forget.
And you're a knight[4], too. You vowed you would become a hero.
— But I've always been helpless, and I still am…
It's too early to lose faith in yourself. You're still on your journey right now. Everyone has to struggle with themselves as they walk forward.
Those words reminded Mitsuzane of what a certain person had once told him.

"…Don't be stupid, Micchy. How old are you right now? You know you still have a long way to walk ahead of you, right? Compared to that, it's no big deal."

Mitsuzane, who had been on the verge of melting into the world and vanishing, had a fire within his heart. Within him was the burning fire of the "hero".
The passing "Rider" spoke again.
Now look at the world again. Look at the countless stories of countless worlds. You'll find there's something besides just malice.
And the "world" unfolded again in front of Mitsuzane.
There was a warrior who fought against the ultimate darkness. There was a warrior who reclaimed the destiny of mankind from the Creator. There was a warrior who struggled to end conflict at the cost of his life.
There was a warrior who fought to protect dreams. There was a warrior who fought to save both the world and his friends. There was a warrior who trained in the art of sounds.
There was a warrior who super-accelerated and fought through gaps in time. There was a warrior who journeyed through time on a train. There was a warrior born between a human and a devil.
There was a warrior who fought as two detectives in one. There was a warrior who wished for the power to reach anywhere. There was a warrior who lived through his youth with many friends.

There was a warrior who fought as a magician of hope. There was a warrior who rushed forward as a police detective in a super vehicle.
Countless stories of countless worlds. All of them had conflict. All of them were filled with countless amounts of grief and pain.
But even so, the world was not hell. There were those who protected the world. There were heroes. And everyone had a hero in their heart.
—*Anyone can be a hero.*
Mitsuzane Kureshima had completely remembered who he was.
There was a solid object in his hands. He was holding a familiar Lockseed.
He opened the lock. It was the lock that would pave the way towards a new dawn.
Tearing down the darkness, the young dragon continued down the road.

Part 5

He awoke to see Zawame spreading out beneath him.
But it wasn't Zawame as he knew it. The city had been overrun by the giant Bodhi tree's roots, and the buildings had deteriorated as if hundreds of years had passed.
It was like the remains of the Femushinmu planet after it was swallowed by Helheim.
And, most prominently, everything was completely still. There were no humans, nor birds or stay dogs or stray cats, nor even a single mouse or insect.
Even with all of the greenery, it was the sight of a world completely devoid of life.
Mitsuzane's intuition told him that this was Kugai's world of salvation.
After all of his talk about ultimate evolution, he had been nothing but a false savior who denied the concept of life itself.
If this was all in front of him...had he not made it in time after all?
—No, that's not it. This isn't the real Zawame.

He looked up at the sky. There was a giant, shining lotus flower shining where the sun should be.
This was only one possibility. There were countless possibilities in the world, and when those possibilities converged, a fleeting illusion like this would occasionally come forth.
In other words, this was Kugai Kudou's dream world. It was Kugai Kudou's hollow ideal dystopia.
"...Why, Mitsuzane Kureshima?"
Under the Bodhi tree towering above, Mitsuzane Kureshima and Kugai Kudou stood across from each other.
Kugai Kudou's expression had lost all of its prior calmness. His eyes were trembling in fear of what he couldn't understand.
"You should have melted into the world and become one with my will. How did you manage to maintain your ego?"
"Because I know something with more certainty than you could ever imagine."
His words were firm as he unlocked the Lockseed in his hand.
Grape!
He shouted the word with his vow to never give in.
"Transform!"
The Lockseed in the Sengoku Driver. There was his core. There was where all of his soul was concentrated.
Lock on!
The Sengoku Driver played the battle herald to spur on the warrior.
The cutting blade swung down, and the hero's armor was called into the world.
Grape Arms! Dragon blast! Ha-ha-hah!
Ryugen appeared in a flash of brilliant light, and for a moment, Kugai Kudou felt fear. He shouted with all of the anger he had, as if trying to deny the terror springing up within him.

“Do you think you can defeat me on your own, Mitsuzane Kureshima?!”
Kugai Kudou held out the Golden Fruit in his palm.
A multitude of Cracks appeared around them, and locust and pitcher plant monsters began to appear in droves.
“I have obtained the Golden Fruit! No, I have become Golden Fruit itself, the source of all evolution! You have no way of destroying me!”
Ryugen continued to fight the army of monsters alone.
“Why must you refuse my salvation? Why do you choose to struggle in vain within this hell?”
“If your salvation means giving up on life itself, I’d still rather choose a future where I have to keep fighting!”
Grape Squash!
Energy concentrated around both of Ryugen’s legs, and he leapt into his special finisher kick — the Ryugen Kick.
Jumping over all of the monsters heading for him, he headed straight for Kugai Kudou in a straight path — !
“Are you so enthralled by the idea of slaughter, Mitsuzane Kureshima? You are the one who continuously betrayed others and sowed the seeds of conflict. Your soul is already tainted.”
Kugai Kudou held out his palm again, and the Golden Fruit shone.
As Ryugen descended on Kugai, someone appeared between them.
Lemon Energy!
A single powerful shot sent Ryugen’s kick flying. Ryugen managed to land on both feet.
Ryugen turned to face his new opponent, and, upon realizing who it was, yelled in shock.
“You’re…!?”
The arrogant nobleman ruler in shining amber — Armored Rider Duke.
“…Ryouma Sengoku?”
“Now that I have become one with the world, nothing is impossible for me as

the Golden Fruit. If you wish for eternal conflict, I shall create endless enemies for you."
As Duke silently shot arrows from his Sonic Arrow, Ryugen shot the arrows down with his Grape Dragun.
"You are fighting in vain, Mitsuzane Kureshima. You could not win against this man. You understand, do you not?"
Kugai Kudou seemed to have regained his bearings, and had now resumed speaking in a calm voice. But his mouth was distorted with sadistic pleasure — a smile one could not imagine on a savior.
Dragonfruit Energy!
Duke attached a different Lockseed and changed into a different form.
Armored Rider Duke Dragon Energy Arms.
It was the Arms that Megahex's Ryouma Sengoku clone had used.
"…"
In front of an enemy that should have easily sent him into fear, Ryugen was silent.
What Kugai had said was true. In the end, Mitsuzane had been nothing more than a clown dancing in Ryouma Sengoku's palm. In the end, he had lost the one most dear to him. But —
"Aren't *you* the one who couldn't win against him?"
"…What did you say?"
Before Kugai could figure out what his words truly meant, Ryugen started running forward.
In response to Ryugen's rather impulsive attack, Duke attempted to intercept him, but —
"What's the point in making such an empty vessel?"
Ryugen was much faster than Duke, and had already gotten within reach.
Using all of his strength, he grabbed the Core Unit with the Lockseed in it and yanked it off.
Duke's transformation released…to reveal nothing inside.

“Ryouma Sengoku was the worst kind of human being, but he was most certainly a genius. You, Kugai Kudou, were the one who was afraid of him.”
“…I was not. I valued Ryouma Sengoku’s research more than anyone else. I considered him to be an indispensable person for humanity’s salvation, but he refused my offer. Alas, it was Ryouma Sengoku’s greatest mistake. If he had only taken my hand back then…he could have witnessed the birth of a god.”
“Ryouma Sengoku saw right through you. You’re just a ghost who can’t create anything. You’re just trying to drag all of humanity down with you.”
“…You simply can’t comprehend the loftiness of my ideals.”
“Yeah, of course I can’t…not with your third-rate line of thinking!”
Kugai was wearing the same expression Ryouma had in the video. His face was distorted in anger, more disgustingly hideous than ever before.
” — You shall be sent to hell.”
Kugai’s declaration was accompanied by an army of Kurokage troopers and a swarm of Invase.
It was a recreation of the hell he had seen earlier. But before the army of hell managed to reach Ryugen —
Melon Energy!
Walnut au Lait!
Durian Squash!
Acorn Sparking!
Arrows of light from the Sonic Arrow, energy bullets from the Walnut Bomber, energy waves bursting from the Duriking Casque’s crest, acorn energy emitted by the Malletcorn — all rained on the army of hell, one after another.
“This cannot be…this should be impossible…!”
Listen from afar, approach, and see for yourself.
In front of the agitated Kugai were four brave figures standing side by side.
Armored Rider Zangetsu Jinba Melon Arms!

Armored Rider Knuckle!
Armored Rider Bravo!
Armored Rider Gridon!
“Guys…!”
Ryugen was overjoyed to see his friends. Of course, he had no doubts about their safety. If he had managed to overcome his own hardships, it was only natural that they had overcome their own as well.
But it was the exact opposite for Kugai, for whom this turn of events was completely incomprehensible.
“Beyond just Mitsuzane Kureshima…All of you escaped my salvation…?!”
“*Idiot!* Well, of course an arrogant fool like you would never understand.”
“You seriously think that’s hell? That’s nothing compared to Charmant during Christmas season!”
“We’ve gone through *way* more of this stuff than you.”
“That’s right, Kugai Kudou. Your so-called salvation is empty, and nothing more.”
Aiming the Sonic Arrow at Kugai, Zangetsu spoke his words firmly.
“All right, everyone. We’re saving the world.”
It was the cue for their final battle.

“You are not worthy of being saved! I must erase you completely here, or humanity shall be forced to wander the depths of darkness once again!”
Kugai Kudou held his hand over the Golden Fruit.
A Sengoku Driver and the reformed Genesis Core appeared on Kugai’s waist.
And then, the Golden Fruit —
“The Golden Fruit turned into a Lockseed!?”
The sight of the Lockseed evoked a painful memory in Takatora. It had the exact same shape as the one his childhood friend, Touka Akatsuki, had used.
The Apple Lockseed. The first Lockseed developed by Ryouma Sengoku.
Everything had started from there. So had Kugai Kudou’s own destiny.

Kugai Kudou's Lockseed shone with a golden light. The Pomegranate Lockseed appeared in his other hand.
Pomegranate! Golden!
" — Transcend."[5]
Kugai Kudou's body was covered in golden and blood-colored armor.
Blood Pomegranate Arms! The twisted bloom of sacrifice!
Gold! Golden Arms...The Golden Fruit...!
Covered in the color of blood and a golden glow, the grotesque savior descended upon them.
Armored Rider Saver Golden Arms!
"Prepare yourself!"
Bravo wasted no second in slashing Saver with his Duri Saws.
Saver blocked one of them with his Saver Arrow and the other with his double-edged longsword, the Sword Bringer.
"Why, you..."
"The spider's thread has broken for the sinners who refuse salvation!"
Toppled by the attack, Bravo staggered and fell. A cross of slashes from Saver's double swords converged on him.
"Not so fast!"
Zangetsu jumped out in front of Bravo and blocked Saver's slash with his Melon Defender.
"Ah, Sir Melon...You came to protect me...!"
Gridon and Knuckle followed up by jumping on Saver simultaneously.
"Take that!"
With the Malletcorn and Wallet Bombers, they lunged at Saver with a flurry of hits.
But Saver deftly used his swords to endure all of them.
"How insolent!"
Saver's bloody shockwave blew Gridon backwards.
"Dammit!"

“I’ve got more coming!”
Knuckle attacked the Chestnut Energy Lockseed to his Genesis Core.
Jinba Chestnut! Ha-hah!
As the armor wrapped around Knuckle, spikes protruded from his fists, and ejected into arrows pouring onto Saver.
“Hraaaaaaagh!”
Both of Knuckle’s fists, with their chestnut shell armor removed, were now burning with fire.
His burning fists burst as they headed towards Saver!
Melon au Lait! Jinba Melon au Lait!
Zangetsu’s blade of energy followed only a split second later.
Saver was engulfed by the force of two simultaneous Jinba Arms finishers.
But he did not fall, and powerful energy began to accumulate in both his Sword Bringer and Saver Arrow.
“…Extinguish them!”
Having exhausted their energy with their finishers, Zangetsu and Knuckle were left wide open. Gridon was still on the ground. Bravo would not make it in time. The situation had become dire, but then, at that moment —

Jinba Dragonfruit!

” — !?”
Everyone turned their heads to look at the source of the electronic voice.
Ryugen was standing there in new armor. His Sengoku Driver was equipped with a Genesis Core and a Dragonfruit Energy Lockseed — indeed, it was the one Ryugen had snatched from Kugai’s phantom of Duke in their prior battle.
The fire of the hero burning in his heart, the double dragon of the gale —
Armored Rider Ryugen Jinba Dragonfruit Arms!
“…You!”
“This is…the end!”
Ryugen’s Sonic Arrow released arrows of energy that turned into two

dragons and converged on Saver!
Knuckle, Zangetsu, and Ryugen. The impact of three finishers in a row finally caught up to Saver, and the final wound was fatal.
The gold on Saver's armor cracked and peeled off like gilded plating. Saver screamed his death throes as he was caught up in the explosion.
And yet still —
"It's futile…it's all futile…!"
Kugai's voice was coming from nowhere —
Darkness Arms…The G…llllden Fruit…!
The golden glow was gone, and he was now dyed in tattered red and dull, dark colors, but Saver had reappeared, completely unharmed.
Armored Rider Saver Darkness Arms.
"I have become the Golden Fruit, and am now one with the world. You have no way of destroying me…do you finally understand?"
It was exactly as Kugai had said. Before, he had needed a Sengoku Driver to remain in the real world. But now, he no longer needed anything of the sort.
This was a world created by Kugai himself.
How could one do anything to an intangible spirit of malice that had merged itself with the world?
But even in such a hopeless battle, not a single one of them would give up.
"Then we'll just have to keep fighting you until we finish you off."
So continued the battle between the five heroes and the false savior.
Kugai Kudou, who had considered repeated fighting to be hell, was now himself trapped in that hell.

Part 6

Such a man should have overcome life and death itself.
He should have become a transcendent being free from physical bounds, integrated into the vast multiverse.
He had surpassed time, surpassed space — but because of that, such a man had no future.
With no future, he thus had no concept of creation.
Life evolves. Evolution is creation. Even with the cruelty of the cosmic system called Helheim, there was one thing that was certain.
No matter how much the man had overcome life and death, if he could not understand creation, it was no different from “death”.
Thus, the man had not overcome life or death after all — he was simply just dead.
A meaningless shadow that merely happened to be projected onto the world — a ghost.
Such a man was fighting to erase the five living beings who denied his ideas.
In the midst of his battles, the man had perished many times. Each time, the

cycle would repeat. And then, he would perish once again.
The more the cycle repeated, the more the man lost the gold dwelling within him.
The man had now completely lost sight of his own self.
It was truly hell. And that was simply the truth of his existence.
The man had obtained a truth that was nothing but the emptiness of death.
The man who had transformed many times had finally reached his true form.
“O serpent…guide me…who is lost…”
There was the image of the “serpent” that had once guided the man. And the “death” flowing through him joined with it and took shape.
It was a Lockseed shaped like a cross of bones. The lock opened, and the voice of emptiness rang out.
— Maja!

How long had they been fighting?
It felt as if they had always been fighting, and yet it felt as if they had only just started.
But still, they had fought. They fought. They fought to the very end.
Their enemy had revived after every single defeat, and they were hurt and exhausted.
But they refused to give up. Their hearts would not falter.
The world is not hell, because we know we’ll never be alone.
We are not weak. We’ll overcome any kind of pain we suffer.
So we’ll stand up to protect. Not for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world.
We’ll never let an empty ghost like you make the world into your toy!
And they defeated him many times over — tens, hundreds, thousands of times.
Their enemy had finally revealed his true form.
Bones poured out from the Cracks in droves, as if amassing into a vast

collection of “death” itself.
Maja Arms…The heretical path of the serpent…!
The giant vacant skeleton that revealed the emptiness of Kugai Kudou’s soul — Armored Rider Saver Maja Arms.
“Hmph…I guess we’re really getting started now!”
Zack was laughing confidently, but there was still a tinge of apparent fatigue in his voice.
And beyond just Zack; Mitsuzane, Takatora, Oren, Jounouchi…all of them were at their limit.
But they could not afford to lose. If this was their limit, they simply had to exceed that limit.
That was how they had always fought, and that would always be how they fought.
We’re not afraid to fight. We believe in the hope ahead of us…!
Maja Squash…!
Saver swung down his sword of calamity — the Graveyard Blade — and the myriad of bones became a rushing wave.
The five heroes gathered all of their strength to confront the wave and stood —
Countless stories of countless worlds.
When possibilities converged with other possibilities, occasionally, a new world would come forth.
It would be a fleeting one like an illusion — but it would still be a world.
And although this was a world of death envisioned by Kugai Kudou, it was also a gap between the worlds.
It was a place where possibilities converged with other possibilities.
Ryugen. Zangetsu. Bravo. Gridon. Knuckle.
There was one shared image between all five of their hearts.
— The hero.
If there was something that must be protected, they would rush in like a

knight4 in a gale, even if it meant going to the end of the world.
The hope that the five of them — no, the hope that all of humanity envisioned — was the true gold that would crush the gilded lies.
The people's emotions drew in those possibilities, and incarnated them into a new story.
Now, the world shall play out this tale! The heroes of the grand finale — the Deus ex Machina!

Banana Arms! Knight of Spear!
The aura of a giant banana, shining like a golden spear, blew away the mass of bones rushing towards them.
"Huh…?"
Zack looked around, but he could see nobody there. He couldn't even hear any voice.
But Zack had no doubt about it. He could feel "his" presence.
"Kaito…is that you?"

Pinecone Arms! A single strike! In the shadow!
Then, a large flurry of black spears — Shadow Pines — flew towards Saver.
As the Shadow Pine spears pierced through Saver, he screamed in pain, like a roaring beast.
Oren and Jounouchi watched the spectacle in a daze.
"…What just happened?"
"Hassy…!"

Maja Sparking!
Full to the brim with fury, Saver gathered a large mass of bones and formed them into a giant bone arm looming over their heads.
He swung the bone arm down with a thunderous roar.
"Gh…!"
Zangetsu had his Sonic Arrow and was about to fire, when —
Peach Energy Arms!

Cherry Energy Arms!

The bone arm was barraged with a rain of light arrows.

All of it was completely crushed and ground into dust.

— Nothing's changed after all, has it, Chief?

— Can't believe you had to get me to step in for you, though.

Somehow, Takatora felt as if he could hear those voices. And then —

Lemon Energy Arms!

Fight power! Fight power!

Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! F-F-F-F-Fight!

Saver had a giant hole in his chest.

A deadly Sonic Volley from a Sonic Arrow had pierced right through him.

"Ryooooooooumaaaaaaaaaaaaa…!"

Saver let out a blood-curdling shriek and fell to the ground.

And with that, Saver's deathly Zawame began to collapse.

Part 7

Before anyone could process what exactly had just happened, everything around them began to collapse.
The earth split into pieces. The Bodhi tree had collapsed, and the lotus flower in the sky withered and scattered into petals.
“Hey, wait, what’s happening to us now!?”
Zack was caught off guard by the sudden turn of events.
“Kugai Kudou’s world…is collapsing.”
Mitsuzane understood what that meant. If Kugai Kudou’s world was collapsing, that meant Kugai Kudou himself had finally been destroyed.
“…So it’s finally over.”
“*S’enfuir!* This isn’t the time to be dwelling in sentiments, Sir Melon! We’ve got to get out of here!”
“But Oren, when you say ‘get out of here’, where and how do you mean!?” said Jounouchi.
— No. It wasn’t over yet.
A vast number of bones was gathering around where Saver had fallen.

The giant mass of bones engulfed Saver's body and formed into a giant.
It had fangs that could tear through anything. It had a jaw that could crush anything.
It was a huge predator in the shape of a carnivorous dinosaur, made up of skeletons.
The head of the skeletal dinosaur split into four, revealing a large skull with Saver embedded in it.
"Gaaah! Not again, dammit!"
"My, we really are in trouble…"
A roaring skeletal dinosaur in a collapsing world. The Armored Riders were ready to fight, but the ground was crumbling so quickly that they couldn't even stand properly.
The sound of the bones cracking and the shrieks of resentment rang out as the skeletal dinosaur attacked.
…But there's no need to speak of every little thing that happened anymore.
After all, there was only one person suitable to appear at the very end.

Fruit Basket!

A whole bundle of steel fruits barraged the skeletal dinosaur, one after another, causing it to flinch.
There, between the Armored Riders and the skeletal dinosaur.
There was a single man there, one shining with light and standing with his back to them.
The steel fruits formed a ring and flew around him. The ring converged, getting smaller and smaller, until all of the fruits became vast energy within him.
Ultimate Arms! Great-Great-Great-Great-Great Ruler!
He was the sacred silver and bane of evil who cut through all demons. The form of the hero that dwelled within everyone's hearts.
Indeed, it was —

“Koutaaaaa!”
Mitsuzane was the one to shout his name. He was the hero who had saved and lost everything. He was the true savior.
And, above all — our most important friend.
The warrior in silver turned back slightly towards Mitsuzane and the others. Mitsuzane could sense that, under the mask, his usual smile was on his face.
A Crack opened in front of them.
Mitsuzane and the others were suddenly pulled into it.
“...Does this mean we’re returning to our original world?”
“Huh!? Hey, you! Why do you always have to be like that!? I can still fight too, you know...aaaaaaack!”
“Yes, yes, don’t worry, my dear boy. There’ll be another time, and another one after that. We’ll probably have many more chances to meet again.”
“Sorry, Kouta! Take it down in one shot for me, okay?”
“Kouta!”
Mitsuzane was the last one to speak to the warrior in silver.
“You won’t have to bail me out all the time! I’ll be there to help you, too! If you or Mai ever end up in trouble, I’ll run to the end of the universe if I have to! We’ll always be your friends!”
The warrior in silver answered only with a firm and powerful thumbs-up.
And thus, only the warrior in silver and the bone monster were left behind in the collapsing world of death.
“...Kouta...Kazuraba.”
Saver, who should have almost completely lost his sense of self, called out the name of the warrior facing him.
There was still a faint sense of will within his voice.
“...The Golden...Fruit...”
The skeletal dinosaur lumbered towards the warrior in silver, step by step.
“...I...will use that power...to save...humanity...”
“Hey. What was it you actually wanted to save?”

The silver warrior's question was not one that came from a transcendent being, but from a single mere human.
"I…wanted…I…wanted to…save humanity — "
"You melted into the world and disappeared, and what you actually wanted to save was…yourself, right?"
"…Save…me…"
Saver's last remaining sense of will completely disappeared.
What was left was nothing more than an empty monster, one that roared its death knell in a perishing world.
The skeletal dinosaur leapt into the air, trying to trample the warrior in silver with its overwhelmingly giant body. The ground gave way under the impact and shattered even further, creating a crater.
But the warrior in silver was no longer there.
Still embedded in the skull, Saver looked above him. There was the sky of the sunless world — but now, a giant ball of orange-colored energy was burning there. It illuminated the night sky with the brilliance of the morning sun.
— *Ultimate Squash!*
Enhanced by an orange aura, the silver warrior's kick pierced through Saver and the skeletal dinosaur.
Saver and the skeletal dinosaur were engulfed in a shining gold explosion.
Saver dissolved into the light, like a dead soul being reduced to ashes and dust. The false savior had disappeared.
Within the light, the man who had once been Saver saw a silver warrior who embodied the idea of a hero — Armored Rider Gaim.
"Kouta Kazuraba…how long do you intend to keep fighting?"
In the very last moment, he had regained enough of his consciousness to ask a final question.
It was surely a question about his entire life itself. Sure enough, the warrior's answer was brief.
"Forever, as long as I live."

“…I see. Then live, and die, in this world overflowing with agony.”
Was it a curse? Or a blessing?
So spoke the man who was once Saver, with a terribly calm voice.
“I…will fall…into a place with nothing…alone.”
And with that, the man disappeared.
The warrior in silver — Kouta Kazuraba — spoke his final words for him.
Words that could no longer reach anywhere, for the one who had melted into the world and vanished.
“May you sleep well — Kugai Kudou.”
He spoke the name of the man who was no longer anywhere.

Fin.

Epilogue

Kugai Kudou's plans had been put to an end.
The Bodhi tree towering over Zawame disappeared, as if it had all been an illusion.
All of the people who had disappeared were returned to reality, as if nothing had happened. None of them had any memory of being brainwashed by Kugai Kudou in the first place. The popular subjective opinion was that "nothing actually happened".
But because the Bodhi tree had destroyed a wide area around the underground floodway, Zawame's reconstruction would require even more time and budget, which caused major trouble for the city (the official explanation was that there had been an accidental explosion in the underground floodway).
All of the Pomegranate Lockseeds scattered around the world ceased functioning. They were unlikely to pose any more danger, but it would still be a severe problem if Black Bodhi's Lockseed production technology were to leak out. There had even been some concerning recent events among some secret societies, ones that could potentially have connections to

Yggdrasill remnants. Takatora Kureshima's battle was not over yet.
Oren was absent from Charmant more often than ever before. He was most likely helping Takatora in his fight against the Yggdrasill remnants. The battle of Oren Pierre Alfonzo, the world's greatest pastry chef, still continued on.
Of course, Oren was able to be away from the shop so often because his disciple, Jounouchi, was trustworthy enough to handle things in his absence.
Hideyasu Jounouchi. His battlefield was in Charmant's kitchen. But now, he was once again in possession of a Sengoku Driver. If another crisis fell upon them, he would resume his fight as the ever-persistent Armored Rider.
Zack had long suffered from the aftereffects of his injury — in practice, a psychological one. But through everything between the Neo Baron incident and this one, he had once again become a little stronger.
Zack could still remember his last conversation with Kaito. He wanted to remain strong enough to make him proud. Zack's silent battle continued on in his heart.
Whenever a major incident occurred, Mitsuzane would sometimes assist his brother Takatora, and even fight alongside him. But as a university student, his main duty was to study. Before, he had only been learning because his brother had told him to. But now, he was the one to choose what he would learn.
He would live by his own will. It was a rather small battle compared to the ones he had fought in the past. But it was, without a doubt, Mitsuzane Kureshima's own battle.

On that day, Mitsuzane was sitting on a park bench in his free time between university lectures, reading a thick paperback book he'd been wanting to read for a while.
Hearing lively voices in the background, he raised his head and saw several children practicing street dancing in the distance.

They were obviously self-taught and their movements were clumsy, and their technical abilities were hardly worthy of praise, but it was clear they were all doing their best.

“Hey, your timing was off just now!”

“I only fell out of sync ’cause you did!”

A fight had broken out over a trivial matter. One child, looking disgruntled, left the dance circle and started playing a game on his phone at a far distance from them.

“Oh, dear…”

Seeing it all happen in front of him, Mitsuzane had a pained smile on his face. He considered calling out to them, but just then, the other children approached the irritable child and started dancing playfully in front of him.

“Yo, yo, don’t be mad, cheer up, okay, let’s dance together, yo ♪”

“The heck is that?”

The child burst into laughter and joined the dance circle again, and the group resumed their practice.

As he watched the children dancing, Mitsuzane was reminded of his time dancing with Team Gaim, and he couldn’t help but smile.

— Maybe I really should dance with everyone again.

As he thought that, he looked around.

It was an average day where nothing in particular was happening, but that was exactly what made it so irreplaceable to him.

He looked up at the cloudless blue sky.

Mitsuzane Kureshima made his wish. May this blue sky somehow reach them.

May it reach that star far, far away from Earth — for those people he treasured so dearly.

“I do think I understand a little about how Kugai Kudou felt, because I was also wandering between gaps in the worlds until you came and got me.”

He quietly listened to what the girl beside him was saying.
He looked up at the sky. The planet around him had once been a barren world devoid of even light, but it was now full of nature that flourished with life, with a vast blue sky spreading everywhere.
“There was probably only one real difference between him and us — we have friends, and he didn’t.”
He agreed with her words. Whenever he thought of his friends in the hometown of his youth, those thoughts filled him with strength.
Thanks to that, he could still fight. No matter how many tears he shed, he could still keep moving forward.
— That’s why I don’t think this world is hell.
Just then, his transcendent perception caught onto something.
He stood up and opened a Crack. On the other side was — yet another new battlefield.
“…Is someone calling you again?”
He nodded. He still didn’t know who it was.
But he had made a vow. A prayer to protect. An oath to never abandon. That was everything he was made of.
So it doesn’t matter who it is. I’ll use this power to put an end to the sadness.
— All right, let’s go. I’ll rush in like a knight[1], faster than anyone else.
And today, the gold of his heart shone once again —

“Transform!”

This is my stage now!

Gaim
Series

Timeline

- **Some years prior (*Gaim Side Story: Kamen Rider Duke*)**
    - Ryouma Sengoku develops the first Lockseed, the Apple Lockseed.
    - Kugai Kudou is made into the test subject for the initial Apple Lockseed experiment.
    - The Apple Lockseed goes berserk, and Kugai Kudou disappears from the world (treated as a fatal accident).
    - The Apple Lockseed is retrieved and sent to Amagi Kureshima.
    - Ryouma Sengoku and Takatora Kureshima meet for the first time.
    - Ryouma Sengoku recruits Youko Minato and Sid.

- **Within space-time (*Kamen Rider Gaim Novelization*)**
    - Instead of disappearing, Kugai Kudou becomes a pseudo-Overlord. He becomes a wanderer in space-time and witnesses several parallel universes.
    - Kugai Kudou encounters Sagara, who bestows the power of Genesis on him, and returns to this world.

- **Episodes 1-10 (TV series)**
    - Kouta Kazuraba and Mai Takatsukasa are stranded in the Helheim Forest and encounter the White Tiger Invase.

- Kouta Kazuraba transforms into Armored Rider Gaim for the first time and defeats the White Tiger Invase.
- Kaito Kumon, Mitsuzane Kureshima, Ryouji Hase, and Hideyasu Jounouchi become Armored Riders.
- Oren Pierre Alfonzo enters the front line as an Armored Rider.
- A Lockseed competition is held over Christmas.
- Ryouji Hase's Sengoku Driver is damaged by an attack from Armored Rider Zangetsu.

- **Episodes 10-12 (TV series/*Gaim Side Story: Kamen Rider Duke*)**
    - Ryouma Sengoku is convinced of Kugai Kudou's presence behind the Pomegranate Lockseed incident.
    - Four Genesis Drivers are dispatched.
    - Kugai Kudou is defeated by Armored Rider Duke (Ryouma Sengoku).
    - Kugai Kudou returns to this world and delivers a Pomegranate Lockseed to Shura. (*Gaim Side Story: Kamen Rider Knuckle*)

- **Episodes 13-19 (TV series)**
    - Ryouji Hase eats a Helheim fruit and transforms into the Bixie Invase.
    - The Bixie Invase is killed by Armored Rider Sigurd (Sid).
    - Yggdrasill detains Kouta Kazuraba and Kaito Kumon.
    - Sagara assists Kouta Kazuraba and Kaito Kumon in escaping Yggdrasill.

- Conflict between the Beat Riders is put to a halt, and a joint dance event is held.
- Zack uses a mass-produced Sengoku Driver to transform into Armored Rider Knuckle.
- Kouta Kazuraba and Kaito Kumon infiltrate Yggdrasill again.

- **Episodes 20-21 (TV series/*Gaim Side Story: Kamen Rider Zangetsu*)**
    - Touka Akatsuki kills Amagi Kureshima and obtains the forbidden Apple Lockseed.
    - Takatora Kureshima informs Kouta Kazuraba about the truth behind Helheim.
    - Ryouma Sengoku informs Kaito Kumon about the truth behind Helheim.
    - Takatora Kureshima learns about the truth behind Amagi Kureshima's experiments, and confronts and defeats Armored Rider Idunn (Touka Akatsuki).
    - Ryouma Sengoku secretly disposes of Touka Akatsuki and collects the forbidden Apple Lockseed.

- **Episodes 20-21 (TV series/*Gaim Side Story: Kamen Rider Baron*)**
    - Kaito Kumon investigates the Helheim forest at Ryouma Sengoku's request.
    - Kaito Kumon defeats Armored Rider Tyrant.
    - After using the forbidden Apple Lockseed, Kaito Kumon finds himself in a dysfunctional state.

- Shapool learns the truth from Alfred and returns to his homeland with renewed determination.

- **Episodes 22-23 (TV series)**
    - Kouta Kazuraba learns about the truth behind the death of Yuuya Sumii, who had become the White Tiger Invase.
    - Sagara bestows the Victorious Lockseed on Kouta Kazuraba.
    - Kouta Kazuraba transforms into Victorious Arms for the first time and destroys the Scalar System.

- **Episodes 24-27 (TV series)**
    - Kouta Kazuraba, Kaito Kumon, and Mitsuzane Kureshima each begin their own search for the Overlords.
    - Kouta Kazuraba and Takatora Kureshima engage in battle and promise to cooperate with each other.

- **Episodes 28-32 (TV series)**
    - Takatora Kureshima is removed from his position by Ryouma Sengoku, and goes missing within the Helheim forest.
    - Mitsuzane Kureshima pretends to be Armored Rider Zangetsu Shin and attacks Kouta Kazuraba.
    - Takatora Kureshima is saved by Overlord Roshuo.
    - Overlord Demushu begins invading Zawame.
    - Overlord Roshuo kills Sid.

- Sagara grants Kouta Kazuraba the power of a fragment of the Golden Fruit via the Ultimate Lockseed.
- Baron and other Armored Riders launch an attack on the evolving Demushu.
- Ryouma Sengoku escapes from Zawame by himself.
- Armored Rider Gaim Ultimate Arms defeats the rampaging Demushu with overwhelming power.
- Overlord Redyue invades Zawame with a large army of Invase.

- **Episodes 33-36 (TV series)**
    - Redyue declares war on the entire world.
    - Missile attacks on Zawame are carried out from all over the world, but Roshuo inflicts his own devastating power on every country in return.
    - As Zawame is occupied by Overlords, it is quarantined off from the rest of the world.
    - Mitsuzane Kureshima makes a deal with Redyue to save only the people of his choosing.
    - Takatora Kureshima returns to Zawame and cooperates with Kouta Kazuraba, Youko Minato, and others.
    - Mitsuzane Kureshima attempts to cut ties with Kouta Kazuraba. He attempts to attack Kouta, but is stopped by his older brother Takatora.
    - Kaito Kumon’s arm is injured by an attack from Redyue, and he is poisoned by Helheim.

- Takatora Kureshima transforms into Armored Rider Zangetsu once again in order to stop his younger brother Mitsuzane.
- The brothers' showdown results in Takatora being unable to perform the finishing blow, and Mitsuzane takes advantage of his hesitation to claim victory.
- Takatora sinks into the ocean, and it remains uncertain whether or not he survived.

- **Episode 37 (TV series/*Kamen Rider Gaim Theatrical Movie: The Great Soccer Battle! The Golden Fruit Cup*)**
    - Kouta Kazuraba and Kaito Kumon each individually meet Lapis.
    - Kouta Kazuraba is stranded in an unfamiliar version of Zawame, where all conflicts are resolved through soccer.
    - Kouta Kazuraba learns that Lapis is an Overlord who can manipulate dreams. In cooperation with Lapis, he defeats Kougane, a Golden Fruit artificially created by the Overlords.

- **Episodes 38-41 (TV series)**
    - Ryouma Sengoku returns to Zawame and proposes an invasion of Yggdrasill Tower.
    - Mitsuzane Kureshima abducts Mai Takatsukasa and requests that Roshuo protect her.
    - Kouta Kazuraba begins to awaken as an Overlord due to the influence of the Golden Fruit.
    - Roshuo is reminded of his deceased queen thanks to Mai Takatsukasa, and entrusts her with the Golden Fruit.

- Kouta Kazuraba and Kaito Kumon confront Roshuo. Meanwhile, Redyue attacks Roshuo.
- Kouta Kazuraba defeats Redyue with his Overlord abilities.
- Roshuo dies with the spirit of his queen by his side.

- **Episodes 42-43**
  - The Golden Fruit that Roshuo had implanted in Mai Takatsukasa causes her to lose consciousness.
  - Mitsuzane Kureshima pleads with Ryouma Sengoku to cure Mai Takatsukasa. In order to prevent Kouta Kazuraba from meeting Mai Takatsukasa, he transforms into Armored Rider Ryugen Yomi with the Deathly Feast Lockseed and attacks him.
  - Mitsuzane Kureshima fatally injures Kouta Kazuraba.
  - Ryouma Sengoku extracts Mai Takatsukasa's heart and the Golden Fruit embedded in it.
  - The cruelty of Ryouma Sengoku's actions sends Mitsuzane Kureshima into despair, and causes Kaito Kumon to attack him in anger.
  - Helheim's poison spreads throughout all of Kaito Kumon's body, and by eating a Helheim fruit, he transforms into Lord Baron. Ryouma Sengoku is fatally injured and dies.
  - Kouta Kazuraba revives with unusual regenerative abilities.

- **Episodes 44-45 (TV series)**
  - Kouta Kazuraba and Kaito Kumon fully attain power equivalent to that of an Overlord.

- Mai Takatsukasa becomes the “Woman of the Beginning” and travels between the past and future in the hopes of stopping the conflict.
- Kaito Kumon pursues the Golden Fruit in the hopes of remaking the world.
- Youko Minato and Zack assist Kaito Kumon.
- Oren Pierre Alfonzo and Hideyasu Jounouchi attempt to stop Kaito Kumon, but their own Sengoku Drivers are destroyed instead.
- Zack attempts to stop Kaito Kumon with a bomb he had secretly prepared, but his plan fails due to Youko Minato’s interference. Youko Minato is caught up in the explosion and dies.
- Knowing that this will be the end of his normal days with his friends, Kouta Kazuraba heads towards the final battle for the Golden Fruit.

- **Episode 46 (TV series)**
    - Kouta Kazuraba and Kaito Kumon battle with the world at stake.
    - After a fierce battle, Kouta emerges victorious, eats the Golden Fruit, and reincarnates into the “Man of the Beginning”. He brings the Helheim forest and Invase with him to another planet and leaves Earth with Mai Takatsukasa.

- **(Three months later)**
    - Zawame begins to return to its earlier vibrant state.

    - Takatora Kureshima, whose state of life or death had remained uncertain, recovers from a comatose state and reunites with Mitsuzane Kureshima.

- **Episode 47 (final episode of the TV series)**
    - The Beat Riders resume their activities.
    - Mitsuzane Kureshima is the sole remaining owner of a Sengoku Driver.
    - Hideyasu Jounouchi learns of Ryouji Hase's death and transforms into Armored Rider Kurokage.
    - Mitsuzane Kureshima and Hideyasu Jounouchi struggle in a fight against Armored Rider Jam.
    - Armored Rider Jam is revealed to be Kougane, who had gone through an incomplete resurrection. Mitsuzane Kureshima manages to defeat him alongside Kouta Kazuraba, who had temporarily returned.

- ***Kamen Rider × Kamen Rider: Drive & Gaim Movie War Full Throttle***
    - Megahex flies into Zawame.
    - Takatora Kureshima defeats Mecha Ryouma Sengoku and acquires his copy Genesis Driver.
    - Mai Takatsukasa uses her power to recreate the Melon Energy Lockseed, leading to the revival of Armored Rider Zangetsu Shin.
    - The Armored Riders defeat Megahex alongside Kamen Rider Drive.

- **A few months after *Kamen Rider × Kamen Rider: Drive & Gaim Movie War Full Throttle* (*Gaim Side Story: Kamen Rider Knuckle*)**
    - Zack travels to the United States by himself in order to refine his dancing skills.
    - After returning to Japan, Zack confronts Shura of Neo Baron.
    - Zack receives a Sengoku Driver, Walnut Lockseed, and Chestnut Energy Lockseed from Mitsuzane Kureshima. Armored Rider Knuckle returns.
    - Zack receives Kaito's old Genesis Driver's Genesis Core and transforms into Jinba Chestnut Arms. Black Baron (Shura) is defeated.

- **In succession after *Gaim Side Story: Kamen Rider Knuckle* (Kodansha Character Collection *Kamen Rider Gaim Novel*)**
    - Takatora Kureshima mass produces the minimum amount of necessary Sengoku Drivers for his purposes.
    - With Oren's assistance, he heads to different countries to suppress the Yggdrasill remnants that are still abusing Helheim's power.
    - Black Bodhi's followers create the Pomegranate Core and Pomegranate Lockseed, and Kugai Kudou is revived.